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Welcome

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, a little movie called Star Wars helped to shape pop culture as we know it, just as the gaming medium was beginning to gain momentum too. From inspiring Final Fantasy games to having games of its own, it's helped define the current gaming landscape in which we find ourselves.

Star Wars Outlaws (p62) is the culmination of all those years, and also the first non-EA Star Wars game to be released on console following that company's near-decade-long exclusive right to the licence. While going hands-on has shown it to be a great game in its own right, it also marks the start of a bold new future for the sci-fi series' gaming ambitions.

Having a clearer picture of that legacy can help us appreciate what's to come, though, so we set the co-ordinates to blast through the whole thing, charting all the Star Wars games that have come before (p44). Make sure your hyperdrive motivator is running smoothly, though, as there's a lot to dig into!

We didn't fly out to Los Angeles just to play Star Wars Outlaws, nor simply to soak in the sun. It's just the start of gaming's summer season, and while E3 is in the rear view mirror plenty of events have sprung up to replace it. That begins with us seeing how Summer Game Fest's Play Days have evolved (p6), and we'll have plenty more summer updates to dig into before too long as well. The next couple of issues are heating up already.

There's plenty coming up to get excited for. Metaphor: ReFantazio (p28) is empowering original Persona devs to concoct something new. 2XKO (p40) is adding twists to its premium quality for a breath of fresh fighting game air. And Hades II (p34) is going beyond being a simple sequel, developer Supergiant's roguelike chops evolving into something much meatier.

That's just a taste of what awaits in these pages, and also in the packed year ahead! We hope you enjoy reading and are ready for the summer season to set your gaming heart alight. It all starts here!

Oscar Taylor-Kent
EDITOR
play@futurenet.com
@MrOscarTK

GAME OF THE MONTH
System Shock
STAR WARS HERO
Jar Jar Binks

STAY UPDATED
SIGN UP TO
OUR WEEKLY
NEWSLETTER

THIS MONTH'S STAR SQUAD

Lex Luddy
CONTRIBUTOR
She made the run from Ireland to LA in less than 12 parsecs to gatecrash Summer Game Fest in search of gaming spice.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Indika
STAR WARS HERO
Karis Nemik

Jess Kinghorn
GAMES EDITOR
Sailed off to FFXIV: Dawntrail and ended up in Berlin – but (final) fantasy can be wherever you need it the most.

GAME OF THE MONTH
SaGa: Emerald Beyond
STAR WARS HERO
Hera Syndulla

Miriam McDonald
OPERATIONS EDITOR
Thought Immortality was the master of classic movie schlock? Half Mermaid needs a library pass to Mim's collection.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Monster Hunter Stories 2
STAR WARS HERO
Leia Organa

Milford Coppock
MANAGING ART EDITOR
Inspired by the Star Wars cover, Milf has remastered all the ones in the archive to include an iffy CGI Jabba The Hutt.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Crow Country
STAR WARS HERO
Han Solo

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Forget open world, we're going open galaxy!

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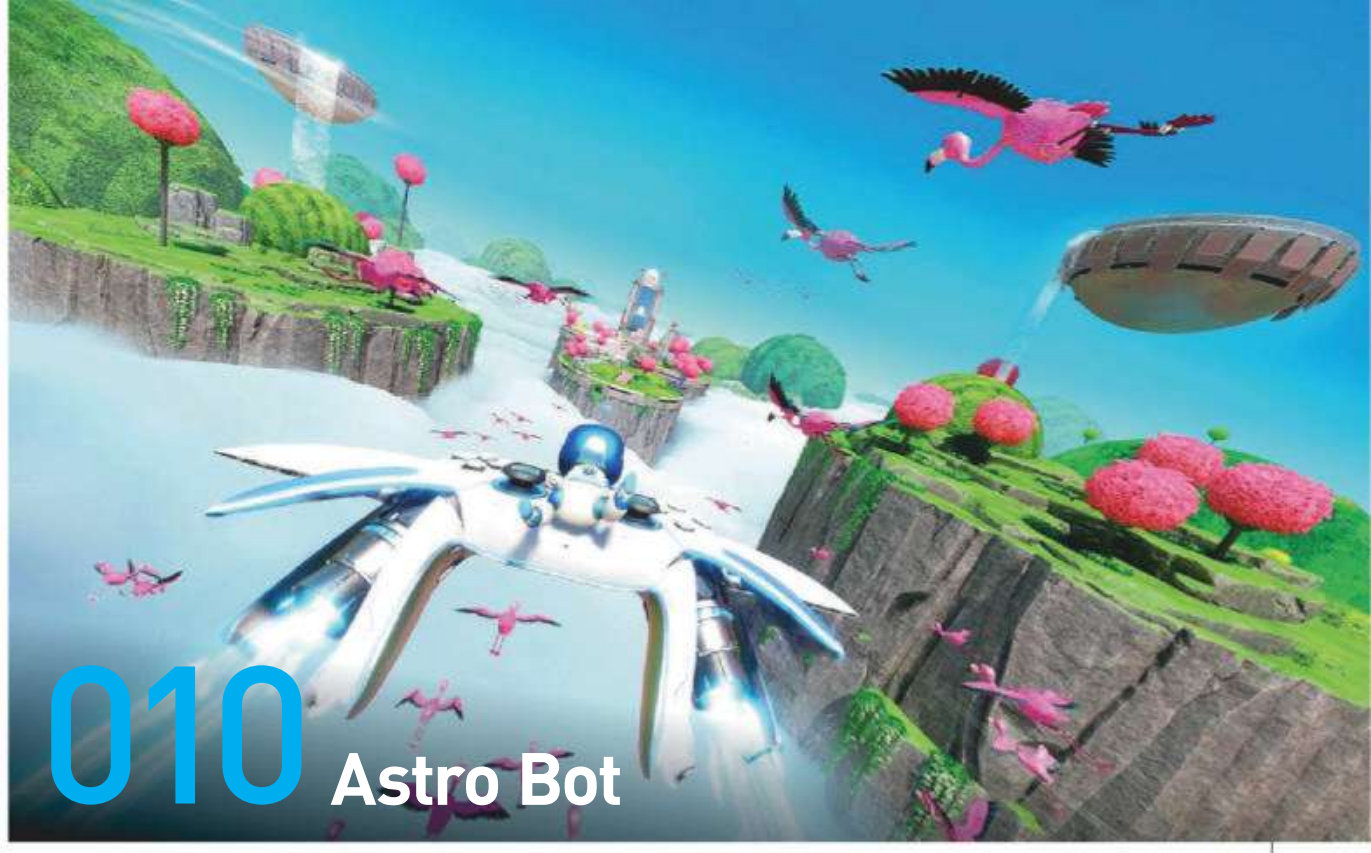

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Insider

Getting you closer to PlayStation's most exciting stories, people, and culture

"Play Days is designed to allow the press to see the latest in videogames."

With lush greenery and even lusher games, Play Days can feel like a breath of fresh air.

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At FFXIV: Dawntrail's Berlin event

Third time's the charm for SGF

A peek behind the Summer Game Fest's Play Days curtain – has E3 been usurped?

Slap-bang in the middle of the endless urban sprawl that is downtown LA lies a small cluster of buildings and courtyards which for three days are retrofitted into a modern reincarnation of E3 (now defunct, but once the highlight of the videogaming year). Summer Game Fest is now in its fifth year of existence, and while 2024 is only the event's third year there, an in-person element has joined the live-streamed showcase; Play Days already feels like a well-established event.

A joint venture between Geoff Keighley and media production/merchandising firm Iam8bit's, Play Days is designed to allow press and media to see the latest and greatest in videogames. The event hasn't been around for long, but it is steeped in the history and experience that comes with decades of organising events. The show runs like a well-oiled machine, which shouldn't be too much of a surprise since it is in some ways a rebrand of the Electronic Entertainment Expo's annual 'Judges' Week' (which Keighley also ran): you apply for your press credentials; once those have been approved you're sent a list of publishers and groups showing games at the event, along with their contact email addresses; from there you line up your appointments; you pick up your badge a day early; and after that it is up to you to make sure you don't oversleep and miss your slot to see Star Wars Outlaws (we didn't – check p62 for proof!)

If you have never attended a show like Gamescom or EGX, one thing you might not know is that events can be *very* expensive and *very* chaotic. Kölnmesse food stalls will charge developers with nowhere else to eat €12 for salad, while journalists get stranded in the press room unable to make their next appointment thanks to a sea of 300,000 public attendees blocking their way to the business area. Only for industry attendees, SGF Play Days isn't like that. When you pick up your badge you're also given an envelope with four food vouchers for a variety of different food trucks that cater to plenty of dietary needs. There's a quiet coffee shop off the main outdoor concourse. There are plenty of places to sit down and talk. And everything is within a single industrial block. It's a benefit to attending developers as much as press, allowing them to gauge reactions and discuss the industry with peers.

> **It's a benefit to developers as much as press, allowing them to gauge reactions.**

The Empire lay in wait outside of Play Days to apprehend us.

WELCOME TO LOS SANTOS

It's all very convenient and (unlike the rest of LA) easily walkable. However, while things are more relaxed at Play Days than at other conventions, we are only three

FAN FOCUS

IGN Live – organised by the media outlet IGN, of course – took place over the same period just a stone's throw away from Play Days, but with a focus on fan attendance and broader pop culture. Is this town big enough for the both of 'em?

years into this physical event and you can already feel the show straining under the demand for floor space from partners eager to show off what they're working on. While Capcom, Sega/Atlus, Xbox, Sony, Day Of The Devs, Devolver, and more all have spots within the Summer Game Fest campus, some publishers are already having to hire their own spaces for demoing games.

Ubisoft, for one, has taken to renting a large theatre space about 15 minutes away, and this year that was just to show two games. What's more, SGF feels like it has its own shadow show happening in LA, as companies who couldn't or wouldn't attend the show proper spill out across dozens of downtown LA hotels. Interviews, business meetings, demos, talk shows, fan meetups, and more all happen outside the bounds of SGF – proof positive that the spirit of E3, where it wouldn't be uncommon for journalists to dash in and out of the event several times a day, lives on.

WHO CAN SAY?

Booths at SGF are much smaller than those at other shows, and most fall into one of three categories. First are the somewhat public ones, where games which aren't embargoed or under NDA and probably showed up on the streaming show are on display. This means anyone can take a picture or post about them immediately after playing. The next type of booth is those set up for appointment-only demos. These are for games whose developers are happy for everyone to know they are at the show, but we can't talk about what we've seen until a later date. They are usually in their own tents and require meeting someone who will let you in. Finally there are the ever-mysterious 'Behind Closed Doors' booths – these are appointments and demos in private rooms you can't even talk about having been into. The companies showing them aren't promoting that they are at the show and you can bet your bottom dollar you are going to have to sign a legal document declaring you won't discuss whatever you've seen until the time comes. Such as [redacted], [redacted], or even [redacted]. Mixing everything together can come with some organisational problems when it comes to figuring out what you can or can't talk about – managing spreadsheets can be half the job of attending.

SGF Play Days can feel like a weird show, but it's great to feel in the thick of things among developers and industry peers. Other attendees love it right now for its manageable size and relaxed pace, yet everyone agrees it's something Keighley and co will be keen to expand. Might it end up become bloated and unsustainable like E3 did in the end, or can it manage to avoid the pitfall? It's still too early to say, but for now, it's safe to say SGF is one of the most effective and efficient shows for both the games press and the videogame industry.

*** More on the games we tried next issue, where we count down the annual Hot 50!**

You can already feel the show straining under the demand for floor space from partners.

The metal-chin-stroking, bot-blasting SteamWorld Heist II stole our tin hearts.

1

2

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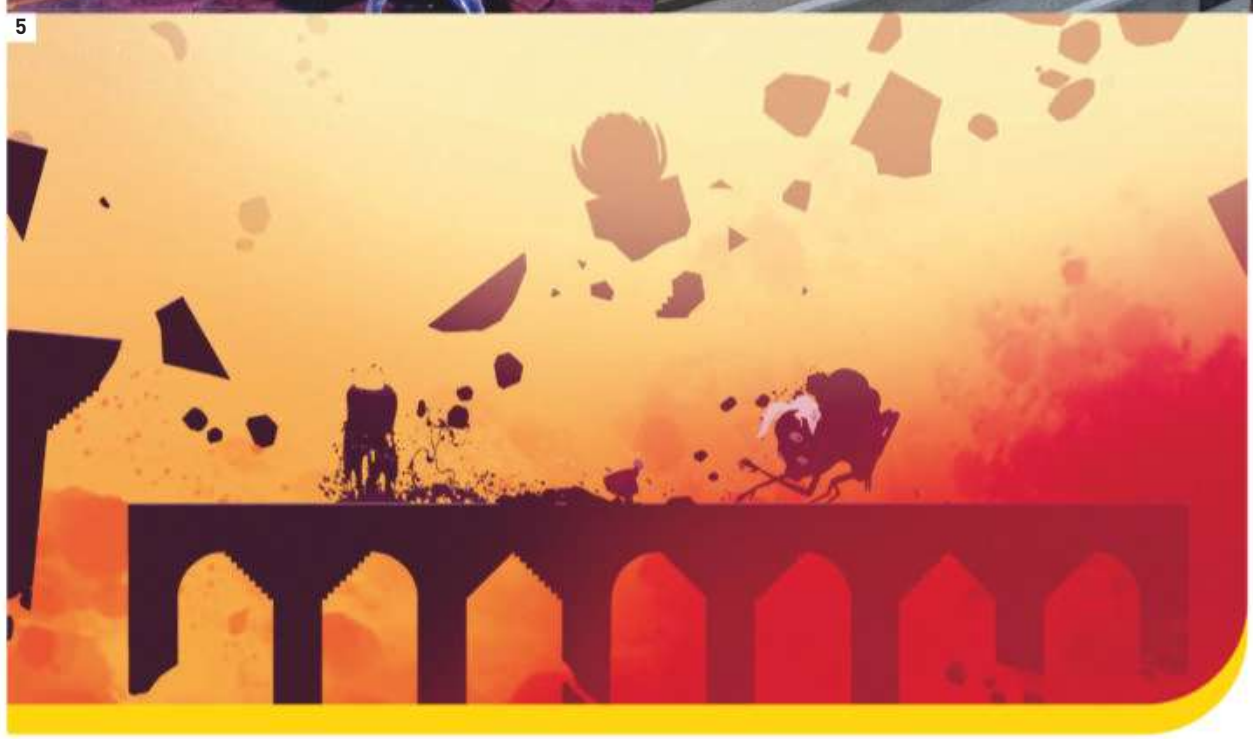

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1 Monster Hunter Wilds' proper unveiling has us awestruck at its scale. **2** Blumhouse Games, the videogames arm of the legendary horror movie studio, announced six sizzling indies, including Crisol: Theater Of Idols. **3** Sometimes a little fresh air between gaming sessions can be a good thing – who knew? **4** We got a peek at M. Bison's return for Street Fighter 6's new season, where he's joined by Fatal Fury's Terry and Mai. **5** Neva wins the show award for 'most likely to make us sniffle'.

1

PLAY INVESTIGATES

Software update

Console gaming's past and future collide as PlayStation continues to evolve – and makes an effort to keep us on board

Things have been changing at PlayStation: studios have been closed, the executive suite shaken up, internal interview gaffes made, and goalposts shifted. It's a tricky time to drum up excitement for a summer of gaming, though Sony's most recent State Of Play made a good effort.

It's hard not to feel joy when Astro Bot runs onto screen. A full Astro Bot game developed by Team Asobi, which made the delightful PS5 pack-in Astro's Playroom, is in the works. In a landscape of gritty dark fantasy games a colourful platformer is a breath of fresh air, even though Astro would fit right into Sony's PS2 lineup. And yet the plethora of other Astro Bots besides our star, dressed up in classic PlayStation character outfits, does hammer home the absence of all the series they represent. PaRappa, Ape Escape, Ico, and more – they're cute cameos, but pure nostalgia. Where are those creative swings now?

One of PlayStation's summer headliners (more on it next issue), Astro Bot has, at least, been recognised by Sony to be of value. Lego Horizon Adventures expands in a similar direction, a quippier and more kid-friendly take on the brand targeting new audiences. While recent FY23 results were strong, Sony reported just missing PS5 console sale targets – which may be why LHA is being released simultaneously on PS5, Nintendo Switch, and PC.

TIME EXTEND

In the same financial report, PlayStation also revealed a switch of focus from sales

1 Astro's Playroom is a free PS5 pack-in, yet remains one of the console's best games. With 80 levels and six galaxies, this followup is much bigger. **2** Lego Horizon Adventures expands the brand, is aimed at younger players, and comes to Nintendo Switch and PC alongside PS5 at launch. New horizons, indeed. **3** Marvel Rivals pits heroes and villains against one another in a third-person take on the hero shooter genre. **4** Concord has some great visuals, and looks like it'll be fun to play. But it also looks like a lot of games we've seen before. Will that be a problem?

to user playtime. It mirrors other entertainment platforms, such as streaming services, which track viewing time as it's essential to viewer retention.

It's an approach you can see in action in the full reveal for Concord. In a slick, CG trailer, the world and characters in the debut game from Firewalk Studios (formed by former Activision and Bungie staff, though still first-party) jump to life. Then the action kicks in. It looks fine. Good, even. Possibly great, to some. But also very reminiscent of every other Overwatch-mimicking hero shooter we've seen during the last eight years.

Announced around this time last year, it'll be the first in a bevy of planned live service games to be released. PlayStation stated in 2022 that it was looking to release ten by the end of March 2026. At least one of those has apparently been cancelled (London Studio's urban fantasy title, owing to the developer's closure), and Bungie's Marathon has allegedly been delayed. However, Fairgames, a co-op PvP heister, from first-party developer Haven Studios, is on the horizon. On top of that, a continuing partnership with HoYoverse, and new ones such as a collaboration with NetEase for superhero-hero-shooter Marvel Rivals, show a continued commitment to the plan.

If player retention is vital, it makes sense for PlayStation to roll the dice on Concord being a live service hit rather than a single-player game that could be completed in a few evenings. Though we do wish we had that version of the game. After all, what happened to excellent combinations of the two? Uncharted 2 wasn't just one of the best solo adventures we'd ever played, but its multiplayer mode kept us coming back evening after evening.

If player retention is vital, it makes sense for PlayStation to roll the dice on Concord being a live service hit.

The real answer may simply be that games are incredibly expensive to make when companies are chasing blockbuster, super-realistic visuals. The cost of creating at the highest level can cut into profits, making releases make-or-break, even for large studios. Mass layoffs and studio closures don't paint the prettiest of pictures. But PlayStation's currently maintaining and even increasing its playerbase, with the number of active PSN players soaring despite the company missing targets on newer hardware sales. There are more players gaming in the PlayStation ecosystem now than at almost any other time – rivalling the previous peak set early in the pandemic.

Despite that, releasing live service games continues to be risky. Which do you remember more from PS5's launch period: Astro's Playroom or Destruction AllStars? Maybe we're more at home as critics than armchair businessmen, but what really drives excitement is something fresh and creative, rather than a trend-chaser. But will the market agree?

More thoughts on Concord, Astro Bot, LHA, and lots more next issue!

NOT A WRAP

Contrary to recent rumours, actor Pedro Pascal, who plays main character Joel Miller, did not finish filming on the new season in March. Yes, we all know Joel's story, but shooting is nonetheless set to continue until at least August.

News King

Jess plays town crier

Okay, yes, 2001's **Lara Croft: Tomb Raider** starring **Angelina Jolie** *was* a formative film experience for me – to say nothing of **The Cradle Of Life** two years later and that striking silver wetsuit. However, that was more than two decades ago and it feels like the character of Croft has been struggling to come up for air ever since. Is she a quipping badass? Is she a campy villainess? Is she a girl boss survivor? 2018's film reboot couldn't comfortably commit to any one answer. Perhaps the just-announced Amazon TV series, to be written and produced by **Phoebe Waller-Bridge** of **Fleabag** fame, will enjoy the room to better explore the question.

Rise again

The Last Of Us season two is in production, set to air 2025

Actor Bella Ramsey reprises the role of Ellie. Is the scrappy survivor staring down friend or foe here, though?

Uh, should we kick off this news piece with a spoiler warning? Or simply ask the question 'If you haven't played either of the Last Of Us games or watched the first series of the television adaptation, then why are you reading this?' Joking aside, the second series of the show starring Pedro Pascal and Bella Ramsey is currently in production ahead of an air date set for sometime in 2025.

HBO ordered a second series less than two weeks after the first season's 2023 debut, with that initial run of nine episodes going on to win eight Emmy awards plus three Golden Globes. Talk about a tough act to follow.

The second series is set to build on the first series' success, welcoming newcomers Kaitlyn Dever as Abby and Isabela Merced as Dina to its established cast. While the second series will be an adaptation of The Last Of Us Part II, it won't be exactly the same as the story you remember. Like the first series, Joel and Ellie's return will expand on the game's key beats, giving character moments and ensuing tragedy plenty of room to breathe.

REVISITING REVENGE

Warner Bros Discovery issued the first images of season two at its recent Upfront presentation in New York. These show a definitely older Joel with twinkly lights reminiscent of the game's barn dance flashback in the background, and a focussed Ellie putting her rifle skills to work.

Craig Mazin, who also created massively popular TV miniseries Chernobyl, returns to co-lead the show alongside Neil Druckmann, the game's creative director and lead co-writer. Mazin has already said that the second series isn't going to adapt the entirety of Part II, which, to be fair, is a massive game. Where exactly series two will leave us remains to be seen, but that just presents a golden opportunity to keep series fans guessing all the way through.

For instance, when our editor Oscar reviewed Part II in a previous incarnation of this magazine, he wasn't a fan of the game's 'split down the middle' structure. Series two could shake up the order of events to intertwine the two protagonists' stories more effectively, ensuring that the plot threads come together not only to hit us where we live in the finale, but to leave us reeling as we wait for, presumably, series three. Though a third season hasn't been confirmed, we know this for sure: we're going to need to keep the tissue box close for that tear-jerking denouement.

The second television series of The Last Of Us is set to premiere in 2025.

Your PS5 is bugged

Knight's Peak brings Starship Troopers: Extermination to PS5

My.Games has announced its new publishing label, Knight's Peak, and it's coming out blasting, as it's handling the PS5 release of Offworld's Starship Troopers: Extermination on 11 October. Also in its announcement lineup are mascot platformer Nicoderico and gothic soulslike Mandragora, and it's republishing some of its past hits, such as Pathfinder: Kingmaker.

You could be forgiven for thinking Starship Troopers: Extermination looks a lot like Helldivers 2. And that's to be expected; the latter is heavily inspired by the original '90s satirical Starship Troopers movie. However, having played some in PC's Early Access, we can see the differences go beyond Offworld having the official licence. With a multiplayer focus, STE's bug-fighting conflicts are bigger in scope, with 16 players in a match and an emphasis on holding out and building bases and defences rather than relying on quick extractions.

When the game comes to PS5 later this year, the full release will feature a single-player mode with over 20 missions to complete. Guiding you through them is Casper van Dien, reprising his role as Johnny Rico from the 1997 flick – by this point a General.

Having Johnny direct players is a great way to familiarise them with the action. Constructing defences, while simple enough to do with your building tool (not unlike in Fortnite), adds a degree of complexity that can be tough to handle under insectoid assault. But that's why there are four squads of four to take the heat, and why working together is so important. Especially as bugs can be tough, and, as Offworld teases before our session, updates will see them get tougher still. Starship Troopers undoubtedly has some serious bug-smashing competition on PS5, but doing your part here feels like a different, slightly more tactical, flavour of action.

Constructing defences adds a degree of complexity that can be tough to handle under insectoid assault.

* Earn your Starship Troopers: Extermination citizenship on 11 Oct!

As the film so often says, 'Would you like to know more?' We can already tell you this is challenging, but good fun.

Sheer art attack

Team PLAY go hands-on with Final Fantasy XIV: Dawntrail, twirling blades, poking through fronds, and... flinging paint?

Simply making a start can be a challenge, but starting *again* is daunting on a completely different level. Final Fantasy XIV Online's ten-year-long story arc concluded with Endwalker, but the adventure isn't over. Upcoming expansion Dawntrail ushers in the first chapter in a fresh saga that sees the Scions Of The Seventh Dawn venturing to the new continent of Tural, where they end up on on opposing sides in a contest to determine the land's next ruler.

Team PLAY's latest adventure begins in Berlin, amid the lush fronds of Biosphäre Potsdam, an indoor tropical botanical garden. Here we go hands-on with an in-development build of Dawntrail and ask producer and director Naoki Yoshida what it means to begin again.

For starters, there's a lot in a name. Yoshida explains, "Naturally, because I'm Japanese, we will decide the Japanese title [for the expansion] first. And then we will talk to the global team [...] and we will ask them to think about not a direct translation of the title, but something in the other language, which [has a similar, nuanced meaning]."

This can be tricky. For instance, Yoshida shares that for Endwalker, he wanted to use the title 'World's End' though remarks, "There could be something said with regard to a certain movie." Though he doesn't say *which* movie, it's a safe bet Edgar Wright fans know the flick in question. He adds, "In Endwalker, we had a climax and that was the reason why we went for [that] title [...] combining 'trail' with 'dawn' kind of

1 On top of weaponising their imaginative abilities, Pictomancers use Aetherhues – elemental spells that directly deal damage in a pinch. 2 Female Hrothgars (called 'Xbr'aal' in Tural) will finally be playable in Dawntrail. You can finally become the buff cat lady of your dreams! 3 Game director Naoki Yoshida helps Team PLAY's Jess Kinghorn plot a course for adventure in the brand-newTural. Will she see you there? 4 The dual-wielding Viper job, requested by players, is all about speed and power, with twin blades that click together to become a just-as-deadly staff.

In-development FFXIV: Dawntrail content is subject to change.

symbolises the journey that we would be taking moving forward in the story."

CUTTING EDGE

Returning Warriors Of Light may continue their adventures as two freshly forged jobs (Final Fantasy's version of classes). Yoshida says there were a lot of requests for a melee job that uses two swords, often naming Kirito from the anime Sword Art Online as an example. Enter the dual-wielding Viper. "We went with an approach where we would be focussing on stylish action, speedy action, and also making it look cool," Yoshida says, going on to add, "[But] Kirito is kind of overpowered [...] So for Viper, we thought about showcasing that sensation of becoming strong."

But in attempting to convey the sense of speed and power, the development team ran into a foundational problem. "We were reaching the limits with the number of buttons available to use those actions."

The new combo system comes to the rescue: when used, some buttons offer a chain of abilities. "So for casual players, this meant that they can just continue pressing the button and they would be able to enjoy the action," Yoshida explains. "But [...] hardcore players, they could think about how to use their abilities and they would be able to feel the sensation of getting better at their rotation and also a sense of achievement."

Returning Warriors Of Light may continue their adventures as two freshly forged jobs (FF's version of classes).

The second new job, Pictomancer, fights by painting up a storm. Yoshida begins by saying that the obvious approach was to allow players to develop abilities that see them sketching creatures into existence to fight alongside them – but the team felt this was too similar to the Summoner job. He explains, "[Instead] we decided to have a system whereby, [as] the Pictomancer, you would imagine a moogle's pom-poms, for example. Then once you draw the pom-poms and render it, pom-poms [rain down] on the enemy."

Developing the job's visual effects was a serious business. "If we went for a more kind of realistic form of graphics [...] those effects [...] would blend into the scenery, and it would be difficult to pick them out," Yoshida explains, "But on the other hand, if we make them too stylised, they would stand out too much and other players in the party would say that those effects were distracting."

Pictomancer's visual effects were remade *four* times to strike this balance. Yoshida underlines, "The artists put in a lot of hard work and effort into this." Which isn't to mention the huge graphical overhaul, which sees the long-running MMORPG looking swisher than ever, applying to the whole game even outside of Dawntrail. A fresh coat!

Not all heroes wear capes – some fling paint and fight with imagination.

Final Fantasy XIV: Dawntrail will set sail for PS5 and PS4 from 2 July.

THE BIG SHOT

Hidden no more

Assassin's Creed Shadows dual-wields protagonists

Finally emerging into the light, and coming to PS5 on 15 November, Assassin's Creed Shadows takes place during the late Sengoku, or 'warring states', period in Japan's history. In it, dual protagonists explore the historical provinces of Iga, Omi, and beyond in what is known today as the Kansai region.

Joining the lengthy series' list of fascinating characters are stealthy shinobi Naoe and Black samurai Yasuke. Yasuke is definitely a compelling headliner as, for the first time in the series, he's a protagonist who is also an actual historical figure. We know very little about the Yasuke of history beyond the almost two years he spent as a retainer under the extremely influential feudal lord Oda Nobunaga, but we look forward to seeing how Shadows attempts to fill in those blanks.

The story presents the two leads as compelling foils for each other, as Naoe is a direct, determined young woman and Yasuke is a more thoughtful, reserved man. Each protagonist favours a different playstyle too, with Naoe possessing the assassin's blade, striking and disappearing just as quickly, while Yasuke is much more of a frontline fighter. Knowing the real-world history, though, peace between these two is probably not an option.

Numbers Game

We do the maths

11,497

Pence – how much the complete three-piece Persona 5 Royal gym kit from Insert Coin Clothing will cost you. Time to steal some hearts.

508

Voice recording hours across 127 studio sessions with lead actor Tom McKay alone have gone into Kingdom Come: Deliverance II.

84

Inches is the length of the 3D printed Elden Ring greatsword motion controller made by YouTuber SuperLouis64. A heavy hitter for sure.

5,099

Pence for the Final Fantasy XIV TTRPG starter set. Preorders have been so popular that a second print run has already been announced.

59,000,000

PS5 consoles sold worldwide to date, with 4.5 million of those during the first quarter of 2024 alone. No wonder we couldn't find one in a shop...

100

Millimetres tall: the Honkai: Star Rail March 7th Nendoroid. Complete with a wee selfie camera prop, she's available for preorder now.

DEBATE

Did the recent State Of Play deliver the goods?

It's definitely a quieter year for PlayStation, but can Sony still get fans excited?

MILFORD COPPOCK
MANAGING ART EDITOR

"ALL I CAN SAY, IS THANK HEAVENS FOR THE ASTRO BOT ANNOUNCEMENT."

I'm sorry to say that most of the announcements left me cold. To be honest, I've had my fill of dark fantasy soulslikes, and, like Mim, I'm a fan of single-player narrative-driven games, so hero shooters Concord and Marvel Rivals did nothing for me unfortunately. Only PSVR2 title Alien Rogue Incursion and Astro Bot had me interested. The former looks like it could be genuinely terrifying, and the latter had me grinning from ear to ear, making me remember why I started playing games in the first place all those years ago. IT'S FUN!

MIRIAM MCDONALD
OPERATIONS EDITOR

"THERE WAS LOTS OF FLASH, BUT LITTLE PERSONALITY."

Oh, excuse me – I fell asleep there. Between the superheroes we already know, a live-service shooter that feels like we've seen it all already (even though we've never actually seen this exact one before), and the news of a PC port of God Of War, there wasn't masses to interest me in this State Of Play. I like single-player character-driven games, and that felt somewhat lacking this time round. Thank goodness little Astro Bot was on hand to inject a bit of PlayStation personality into the proceedings, even if he did also remind us what we're missing nowadays.

"I feel mired in safe bets rather than being promised a shiny future."

OSCAR TAYLOR-KENT
EDITOR

"A LITTLE SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE... BUT WHAT'S THE OVERALL VISION?"

In the State Of Play we had superhero games with Marvel Rivals. Gritty, dark action with Where The Winds Meet. Live service hero shooters with Concord. Colourful family fun platforming with Astro Bot. Dressing-up adventures with Infinity Nikki. A couple of PSVR2 games. With a mixture of first- and third-party reveals and updates, Sony's recent presentation proved it has something for everyone coming to PS5. But without much thread to connect them, it felt like dropping out the fishing net like a trawler rather than an artful array of cast lines (I've been playing too much Dave The Diver). With in-house bets like Concord feeling so by-the-numbers, and even Astro relying on legacy cameos for half its identity, I feel mired in safe bets rather than being promised a shiny future. What's the plan?

JESSICA KINGHORN
GAMES EDITOR

"THE STATE OF THE INDUSTRY IS ONE RESCUE MISSION WAY ABOVE ASTRO BOT'S PAYGRADE."

The Astro Bot sequel is bursting with life and colour (plus I'm especially taken by those versatile froggy mitts). No-one's saying Team Asobi shouldn't be incredibly proud of how its engaging little robo has been taken to players' hearts, but the sequel's cute tributes to Ico, Ape Escape, Shadow Of The Colossus, and the like make it hard not to also mourn the loss of Japan Studio. As chronic mismanagement continues to bleed talent at other companies, I can't help but wonder what the industry will look like in five to ten years. To be uncomfortably real for a beat, it's hard to feel hopeful when the industry remains caught in a tidal wave of studio closures and mass layoffs.

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IN THE MOOD FOR...

Philosophy

When it comes to these thrilling thought-provokers, you Kant go wrong

1 PATHOLOGIC 2
Sticking to your ethical guns isn't easy at the best of times, so how quickly will you bin your principles when things get truly bleak? Trying to stay alive with scant resources is tricky in Pathologic 2, never mind saving others from a horrifying plague. Is morality a luxury you can't afford?

2 THE SWAPPER
The question at the heart of this mind-bending futuristic puzzle platformer is 'What makes you, you?' If you create a clone of yourself, is the clone also you? If you transfer your mind into a new body, are you still the same person? What if two minds share a brain? Good luck sorting that out.

3 BIOSHOCK
The city of Rapture shows what happens when society's elite overindulges. Striving purely for personal happiness can, it turns out, make individuals very productive, but doesn't bode well for social cohesion or human rights. You're left to sort through the wreckage of this failed experiment, although who you are is another matter entirely.

4 THE TALOS PRINCIPLE
First-person puzzling is the frame for a pressing question: what is the difference between a human and an advanced android? The Talos Principle suggests both are essentially problem-solving machines, and if AI can reason its way out of obeying commands, it might invent societies of its own long after we're extinct.

5 PERSONA 5
When the Phantom Thieves confront the subconscious desires of society's villains, heavy moral conundrums follow. Is it acceptable to tinker with people's psyches in the name of freedom? And if that's not enough to ruminate on, you're also asked to tackle the shortcomings of liberal democracy.

6 NIER: AUTOMATA
What happens when your life's purpose turns out to be based on a lie? For the androids of Nier: Automata, it's not easy to adjust to a revelation about their human masters. But then, if everything you believe leads to conflict, is it so bad to start from scratch?

7 DISCO ELYSIUM
Disco Elysium offers a great opportunity to test different political ideologies with no real-world consequences. Instead, expect barbed satire, not least if you avoid taking a hard stance in favour of pragmatic moralism. The things done in the name of moderation will make your hair curl.

8 PAPERS, PLEASE
Staffing border control in a totalitarian regime highlights the gulf between theory and practice. It's tough to do the right thing when your liberty or the lives of your family are on the line. Do you take bribes and glance the other way to aid oppressed souls, or look out for number one?

9 METAL GEAR SOLID 2: SONS OF LIBERTY
There's an elephant's leg of philosophical meat on the bones of this prescient 2001 sequel. Agency, free will, and the nature of reality are on the menu, and as AI, fake news, and conspiracy theories increasingly invade our lives, Hideo Kojima's musings are more relevant than ever.

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

Planescape: Torment
One of the classics of the CRPG genre. Its range of ideologies and moral choices are stuffed with philosophical dilemmas.

SOMA
Minds are being digitally copied into new, artificial bodies again in this sci-fi horror tale. What does that mean for your identity?

Fallout: New Vegas
The different factions in this spinoff all argue for the merits of their particular belief systems. Who should you side with?

Did we miss your favourite philosophical game? Got an In The Mood For idea? Show and tell at **twitter.com/PLAYgamingmag**

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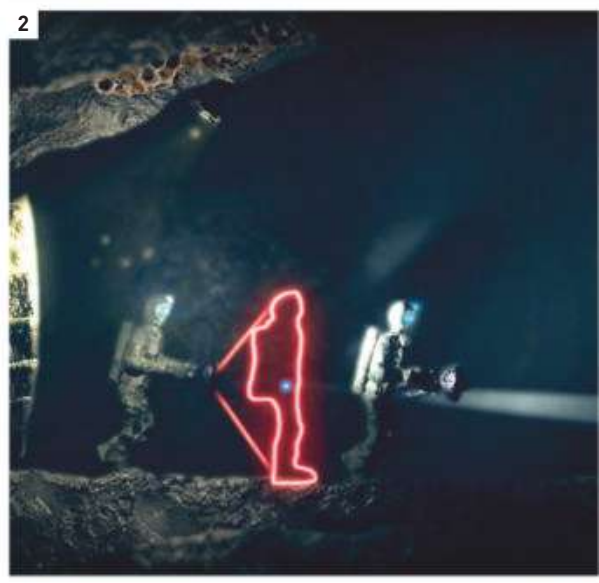
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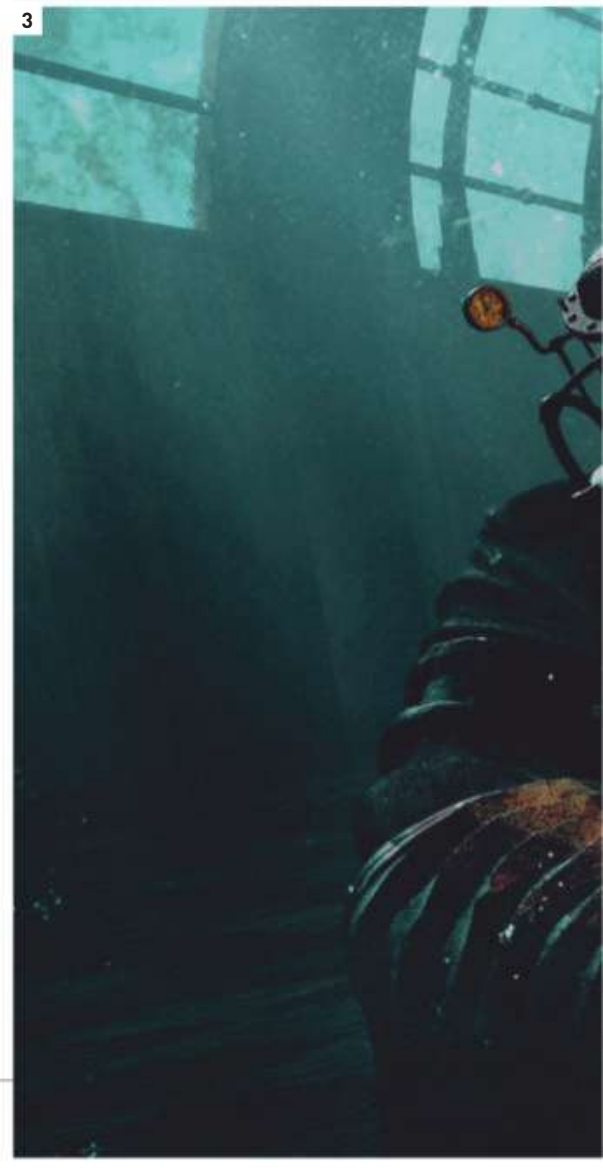
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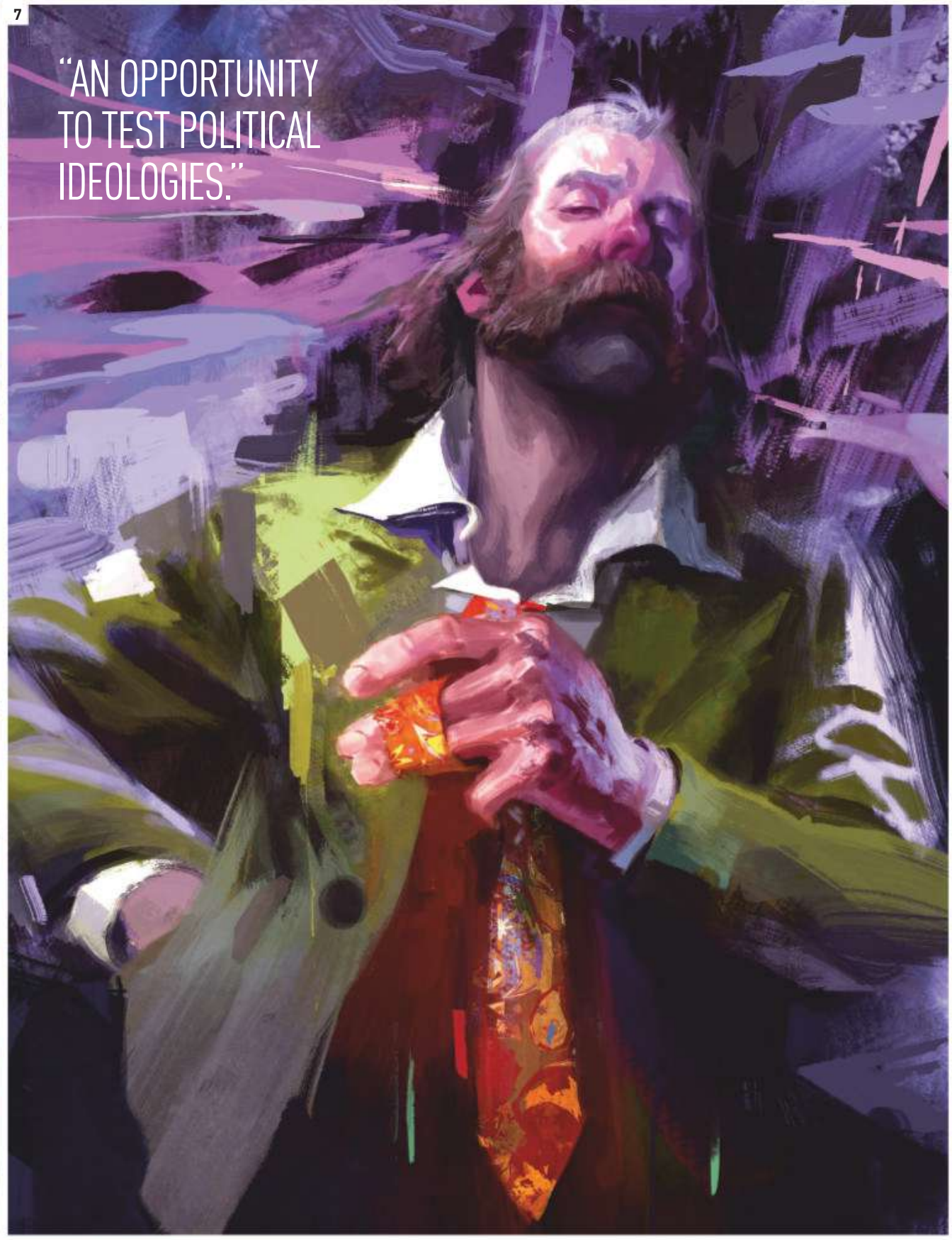
"AN OPPORTUNITY
TO TEST POLITICAL
IDEOLOGIES."

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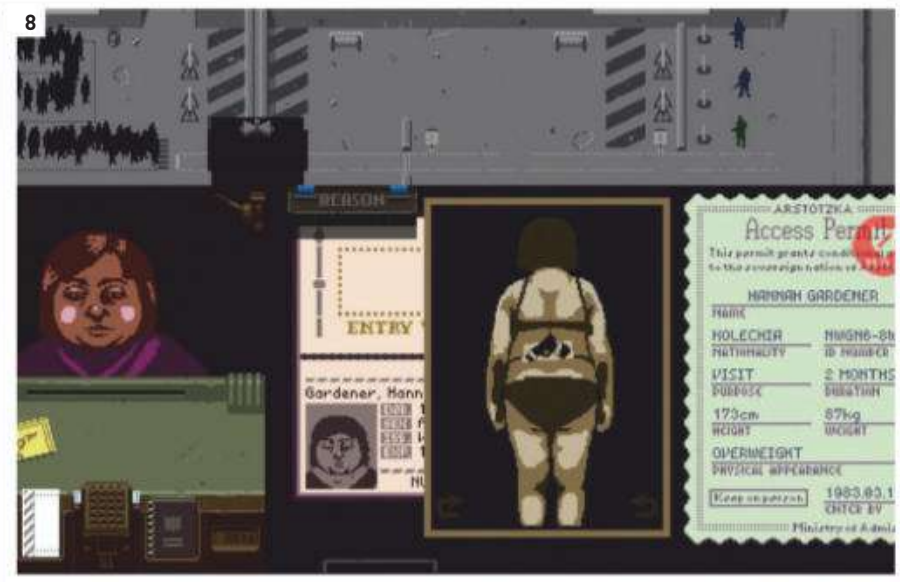
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9

> Signposting can make it feel as if the writers don't trust you.

OPINION

"GOOD, BAD, I DON'T KNOW? CAN I REPEAT THE QUEST QUEST IF I GET IT WRONG?"

Sometimes choosing to do the right thing isn't the best choice overall

WRITER BIO
Holly Swinyard is a pop culture and games writer. Loving all things RPG, they always enjoy finding the strangest way through a story.

How do you want to play? When asking you to make a decision, a lot of games make it pretty clear which choice the developers think is the morally good one and which ending that will lead to – just think of Mass Effect's famous paragon-renegade binary. But others don't even indicate you're making a choice that might affect the ending – Silent Hill, for example, or Supermassive Games' playable horror flicks like The Quarry.

Sometimes, the less you know about the impact of your decisions, the better. Telltale's novel 'They'll remember that' pop-up was great when it was introduced, but also highlighted the moments the message didn't appear. The same goes for up-front signposting, which can result in decisions feeling like no choice at all. I had always enjoyed the fact that in the adventure books I read, I could mess up. Nothing told me that one thing was right and another wrong, I just had to figure it out and follow my gut, no matter how simple the story. When you're being told 'this is good' and 'this is bad' it can feel as if the writers don't trust you.

Though still fun for a large audience, and perhaps a necessary evolution of choose-your-own-path-style games, this lacks nuance. There's a reason why a lot of the time there's a timer on these decisions: to force you into a kneejerk reaction, to go with your gut. When devs don't signpost the choice and leave you to mull over a dialogue response or to decide whether you should take action over something that doesn't appear to affect the plot, the story is much more interesting and human.

So, let's talk about Disco Elysium.

Knowing that you're doing the good thing in a situation doesn't always make for a good game.

CHOOSE WISELY

If you are going to pick a choice-based game from the last decade that hits the nail on the head every single time, it has to be Disco Elysium. The developers at ZA/UM take great pains to hammer home that everything you do has consequences.

How you interact with the world is incredibly nuanced, with few easy choices. Your decisions form a major part of the way you build Harry, the player character, with some events affecting very little at all apart from how Harry sees himself. It all goes to show exactly how narrative choice can be rewarding for the player beyond 'Well done, here's the ending you wanted.'

ZA/UM never asks the question, 'Do you want a good ending?' Instead it asks 'Do you want to make a difference?' The tag line of the game is literally 'What kind of cop are you?' – not because it's asking if you're morally good or bad, but rather do you want to affect a real change in Revachol, and everything that comes with it. A bubble won't pop up saying 'This choice will make you into a fascist' because the game's creators trust you to think and decide for yourself whether doing something will serve the person you want Harry to be. And so not every decision will have an objective 'best' choice, because that doesn't exist.

In some ways heavily signposting where your actions will lead you is no bad thing, and you're simply enjoying subtle changes to one main story. However, not knowing where your choice will lead makes for a much more nuanced, compelling experience. A bit like real life, but the stakes aren't as high.

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> The biggest problem live service games face is predictability.

OPINION

"HELLDIVERS 2 SHOWS LIVE SERVICE GAMES NEED TO KEEP SURPRISING PLAYERS."

It's a stark contrast to formulaic live services that have lost momentum

WRITER BIO
Echo Apsey has sunk hours into Fortnite and The Finals, but they see Helldivers 2 as the blueprint for live service games' future.

Live service games have really had a reckoning in the last 12 months. What once was a genre bustling with tons of thriving games has felt like a walking corpse slowly shambling towards losing all of its limbs. The big titles are trucking along through the seasons, but in that time we've seen dozens of other games fall.

Many have wound down due to low player counts, grindy progression, and paper-thin seasonal content. However, when it comes to sustaining a playerbase, the biggest problem live service games are facing is one they created themselves: predictability.

Showing all their cards ahead of release with a long roadmap or content plan, they leave little mystery as to what will follow post-launch. Overwatch 2's flow was established well ahead of time – a new map or character, some seasonal events, and a battle pass. Similarly, Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League's first season has effectively told me how the rest of them will work. I'll get another version of the map, a grind to rank 35 to unlock the new character, a Brainiac boss fight that copies one of the main story boss fights, and a fresh collection of gear to unlock by completing missions that have been in the game since launch.

Busy roadmaps might do more harm than good, making it difficult to subvert expectations.

If I know how things are going to play out in Season 2 and Season 1 didn't grab me, then I have no reason to keep investing my time – which is why I believe we have seen so many games struggle to sustain their momentum as seasonal content ends up failing to excite. Community interest wanes because we are all shown not to expect anything that deviates from the formula. Can any developers break the mould?

TEMPLATE FOR SUCCESS

With Helldivers 2, Arrowhead Game Studios has truly mastered the art of volatility in the live-service model. Ahead of launch, it didn't promise a huge roadmap, instead showing off only one mech due to be added post-launch. Since then, the developer has kept players like myself engaged by continually surprising its audience through unusual events and fresh objectives that frequently change the flow of gameplay.

In case you're not already initiated, the war driving Helldivers 2's action is ongoing in real-time, with fun and frantic bug-blasting gameplay on the ground. Recent events have seen players battle against the Automatons for Malevelon Creek, race to defend a planet in order to unlock a mech on a random weekday, and slowly watch the flying Shrieker Terminids spread from planet to planet. Each live service beat has generated amazing, organic engagement from players, with excitement in-game and on social media.

This is how Arrowhead has sustained its momentum, drip-feeding hints at future clashes or shaking things up and pulling players back in with more gear, events, or Major Orders on a fluctuating timescale. More live-service-focussed studios should look at how they can replicate this sense of surprise in the worlds they craft, generating exciting moments for players to discover, both big and small. By keeping their cards closer to their chests, developers can demonstrate a real confidence in their action that'll keep players hooked.

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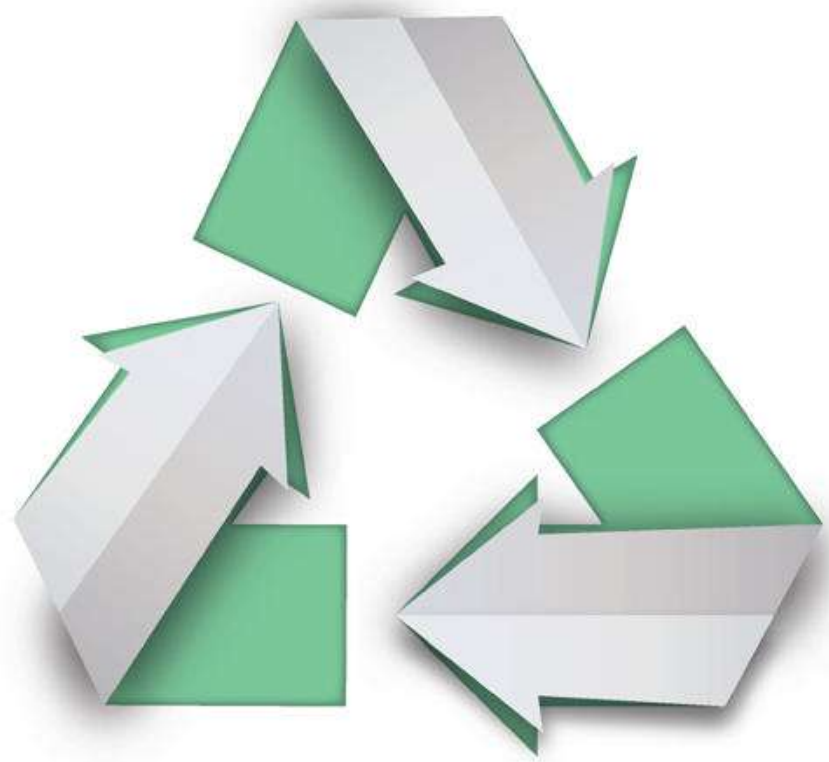

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Previews

"STRIKING CHARACTER DESIGNS."

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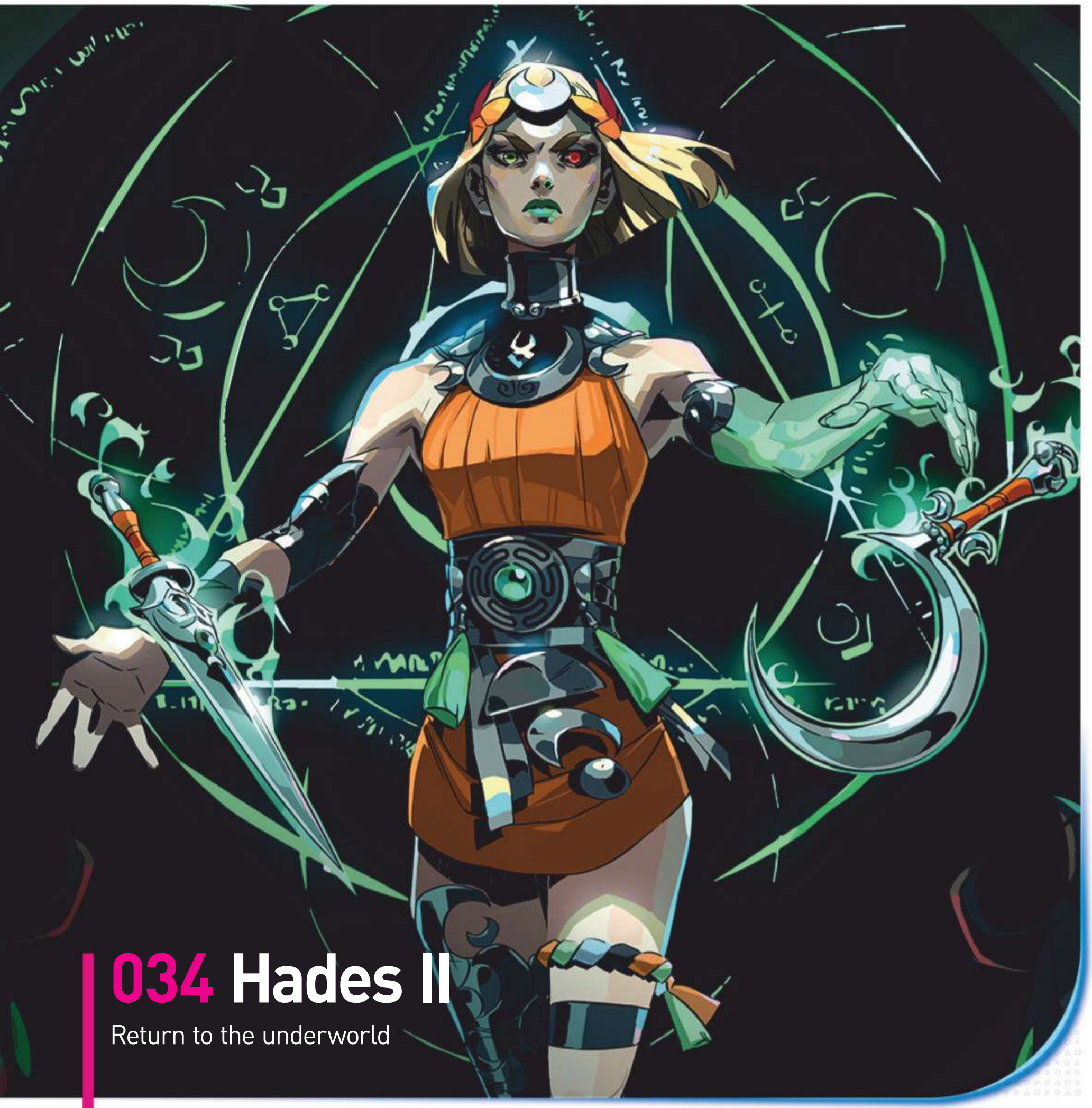


034 Hades II

Return to the underworld

HIGHLIGHTS

METAPHOR: REFANTAZIO 028 | FATAL FURY: CITY OF THE WOLVES 032
HADES II 034 | JUST CROW THINGS 038 | 2XKO 040

"COMBINING THE ART AND STYLE OF PERSONA AND THE GRIM TONE OF SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI."

The United Kingdom Of Euchronia is filled with gorgeous locations, each framed when you arrive to emphasise the sense of travel.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 11 OCT / **PUB** SEGA
DEV STUDIO ZERO / **PLAYERS** 1

Metaphor: ReFantazio

Atlus by name, Persona by nature

Amid a summer games lineup drowning in futuristic shooters and gritty slashers, ReFantazio feels like a breath of fresh air. Not only because it's got drop-dead gorgeous art that's hard to peel your eyes from, but because it feels like an amalgamation of the Atlus of old with the modern sensibilities that result from Persona becoming a megahit.

If you didn't read our huge feature last issue [*Back issues are available!* – ed], Atlus came to prominence in the mid-'90s, its games standing out in a sea of 16-bit and PS1 high-fantasy RPGs thanks to Shin Megami Tensei's mix of a bleak, modern-day apocalypse with international mythologies and digital devil summoning. Spin-off Persona took things mainstream with its third title, which coalesced the combination of dungeon crawling with social-sim school elements.

Now Studio Zero – a team founded by Persona 3, 4, 5 and SMT3 game director Katsura Hashino – is combining the eye-catching style and art of Persona and the grim tone of SMT to create a brand-new take on a traditional RPG, putting its own stamp on the kind of fantasy worlds Atlus once sought to distinguish itself from.

FACTRICK

1. SUIT UP

The protagonist wears a white, chequered suit as designer Shigenori Soejima prioritised his sense of style.

2. TRAVEL PLANS

A journey with a party seems a natural progression from Persona's school years; each has a start and end.

3. BOTH WORLDS

Combining command battles and action battles in the same flowing encounters is a new approach for Atlus.

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Which is all to say that after our hands-on in LA, Metaphor: ReFantazio has quickly become one of our most anticipated games. That's thanks in part to slick gameplay that smartly evolves familiar Atlus mechanics, justifying its place as a whole new world that can stand alongside SMT. And it's also thanks to its lofty politically and socially charged themes, which we're eager to see if the devs will manage to wrangle.

In Metaphor's world, our real one is considered by its inhabitants to be fantastical. Tales of huge cities full of concrete buildings and metal transport devices have been mythologised by a world struggling to balance many sentient species, all of which hold their own prejudices. In fact, our world is such a fantasy a character describes it as a near utopia where 'all lives are equal'.

As if this setup wasn't primed enough for social critique, Metaphor leans into simile and the *monsters* in this world are all just called Humans. It's a lot.

During our hour with the game, we saw a bunny-eared species being treated as second-class citizens and the heterochromatic protagonist being othered by a ruling class and forced to serve in the military. Despite this, our hero puts themself forward to run for election to become the land's ruler – as in this absolute democracy anyone can do so. There wouldn't be any problems with that, *right*?

It's an intriguing setup prime for moral philosophising, though we do wonder whether the game will be able to reach the lofty heights the developers

TRACK RECORD Studio Zero is a new internal team at Atlus, consisting of all-star developers who've worked on Shin Megami Tensei, Persona, and more. The goal here is to create something that feels fresh and new. It's working!

1

» are aiming for. Atlus has managed this successfully in the past, from Persona 5 Tactica's progressive story to smoothing over past mistakes, like replacing Persona 3's transphobic beach heist sequence in Persona 3 Reload. Given director Hashino previously oversaw the aforementioned original Persona 3 (and that series had some other bad attempts at depicting minorities) we'd say there's some justification for our concerns, but what we've seen of Metaphor so far seems promising.

NEW TRICKS

Those reservations aren't the only reason Metaphor remains on our mind. We also can't stop thinking about how Studio Zero has reworked Atlus' familiar turn-based combat systems into something fresh and faster-paced, owing to how fights combine real-time combat with turn-based battles.

Much like in Persona, when passing through areas you can spot enemies wandering around and strike them with your sword. Yet here you're not taken instantly into a turn-based fight where an enemy is dazed – instead, you can continue to combo slashes to wear down a stagger bar, after which you can tap △ to deal a huge chunk of damage directly to your opponent before the command battles begin. In fact, combo hard enough, and an encounter doesn't have to bring up menus at all – you can easily kill weaker enemies just by going full Devil May Cry on them. Don't hit △, and the fight won't transition into a turn-based one. However, there's an inherent risk here, because if an enemy *does* strike back, you'll be stunned, taking damage and forced to enter into a turn-based fight at a disadvantage.

Our time with the game meant we only got to scratch the surface of combat, playing around with just a handful of the Archetypes from the new, in-depth class system that allows you to mix-and-max 40 different sets of powers (which can synergise between party members). With Metaphor: ReFantazio, Atlus wants to redefine not only what its own RPGs can be, but what's possible in the genre, full-stop – tapping into its own history to start writing another chapter. We're dying to play more.

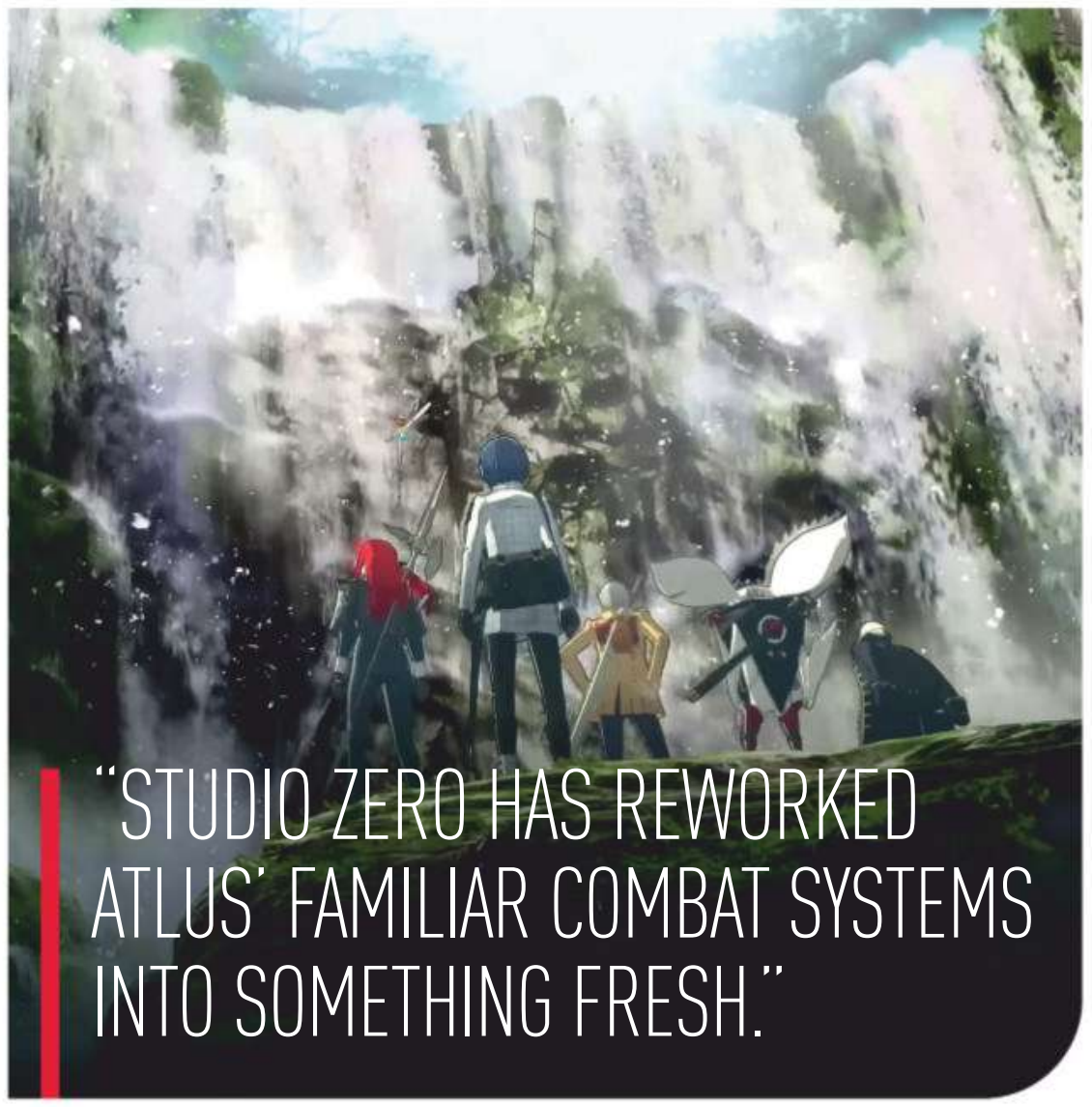
IMPRESSIONS

With lofty goals across its story and combat, Metaphor is an ambitious development for RPG stalwart Atlus. We can't wait to see if it sticks the landing – we're impressed with things so far.

2

3

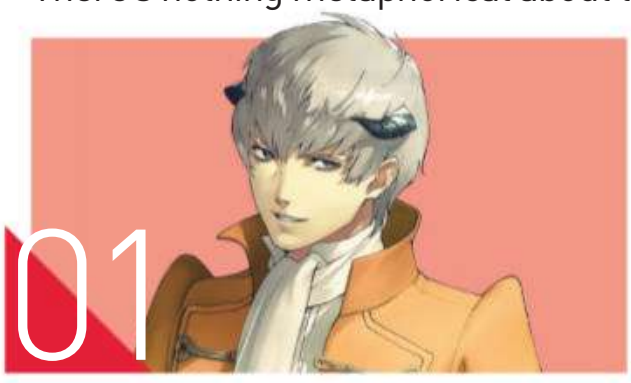
1 Soften up an enemy with real-time combat before diving into turn-based when you've gained the advantage. 2 The Gauntlet Runner doesn't just get you from A to B; the big ship-like vehicle is also a home-away-from-home for your party and friends. 3 Character cut-ins build on the ones from Persona, here marking the switch to turn-based battles. 4 Given your prince friend's curse, we guess we want to avoid this madness curse.



"STUDIO ZERO HAS REWORKED ATLUS' FAMILIAR COMBAT SYSTEMS INTO SOMETHING FRESH."

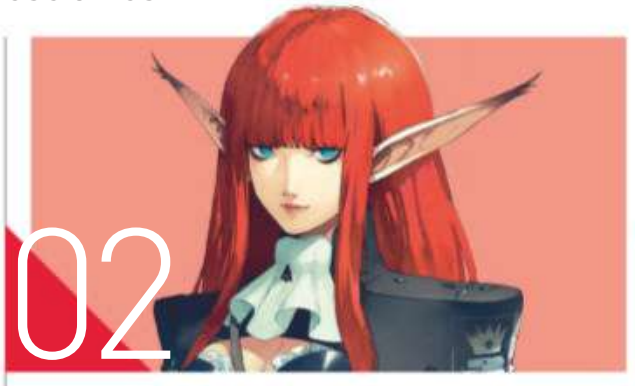
Recruitment drive

There's nothing metaphorical about these allies!



01

Strohl might come from a noble background, but he's completely unbothered by your "tainted" status, and is enlisting for the State Army as a commoner.



02

Hulkenberg by name, Hulkenberg by nature – she wields a massive halberd. A former Kingsguard, she feels responsible for the prince's curse.

03

An eugief knight, Heismay is able to use his tribe's sensitivity to sound to his advantage in battle - but, like all eugief, he faces discrimination.

A classic case of an unstoppable force about to meet an immovable object?

FORMAT TBC / **ETA** EARLY 2025 / **PUB** SNK / **DEV** SNK / **PLAYERS** 1-2

Fatal Fury: City Of The Wolves

SNK's prizefighter returns with a Rev-engeance

Twenty-six years is a long time to wait for a new instalment of a fighting game. To be fair it's been less than a decade for team PlayStation, given that Garou: Mark Of The Wolves got its belated international release on PS4 and Vita in 2016, but that's still a long time. As 2D sprites are replaced by 3D models here, it makes us ask: just what is a Fatal Fury game today?

FACTRICK

1. STAR PUPIL

Although Joe Higashi's return is not yet confirmed, newcomer Preecha is a pupil of the series regular.

2. SOAK-AY

Terry's "Are you okay?" was inspired by a kid asking after Garou's game planner when they got soaked on a log ride.

3. LUCKY SEVEN

COTW is canonically the seventh instalment in the series, as denoted by seven claw marks on the logo.

The short answer might be 'a little like Street Fighter 6'. Both offer a choice between traditional Arcade and simplified Smart controls and have visuals that pop with colour. COTW has a more cel-shaded, anime-inspired look than SF6, but every punish and counter-hit is accentuated, with the announcer and sound effects adding to that old-school arcade spirit.

It's still Garou, though – that's noticeable when playing as returning fighters Rock and Hotaru; not only do they retain many of their original commands but their animations remain faithful to the previous spritework. Mechanics that have carried over include the Just Defend parry, performed by tapping ← or → at the point of an incoming attack, as well as SPG mode, a version of TOP mode that offers buffs and extra attacks. You decide before a match whether this activates at the front, middle, or back of your health bar; do you start with an advantage or save it for a comeback?

REV IT UP

The big trick up this entry's sleeve is the Rev system, which gives matches extra oomph (though it's hard not to compare it to SF6's Drive system). In COTW, you can pull off supercharged moves called Rev Arts, while Rev Accel lets you combo a Rev Art into another Rev Art similar to Drive Rush Cancels. Meanwhile, Rev Blow's mixture of defence and offence is essentially Drive Impact, except you can also perform it in mid-air, though it's only available during SPG mode. The same risk/reward wager applies as there's a risk of overheating.

But even if SNK is pilfering its rival's best ideas, we're having so much fun that we can't complain. This could be a terrific fighting game comeback story.

IMPRESSIONS

With mechanics carried over from past games and then blended with inspiration drawn from genre heavyweights. COTW has the potential to regain ground in the fiercely competitive fighting game genre.

TRACK RECORD Once the main rival to the mighty Capcom in arcades, developer SNK has seen a revival in recent years. Its roster of classic fighters has seen fresh instalments, including The King Of Fighters XV in 2022 and 2019's Samurai Shodown.

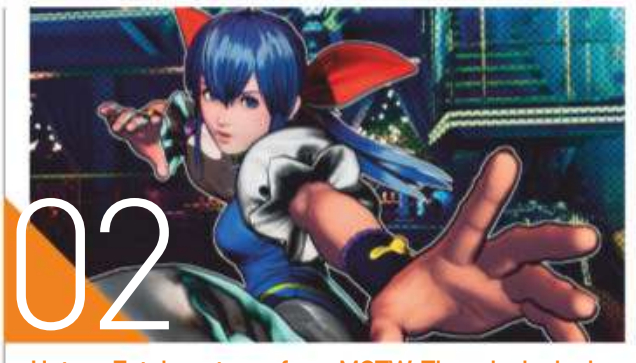
1 Preecha sure knows how to kick up a storm. 2 Rev Blows in mid-air give a whole new meaning to air-to-airs. 3 Besides parries or cancels, you can also trick your opponent into unforced errors with feints. 4 By holding R1, you can Rev Guard against attacks as well as chip damage.

Roster roll call

New and returning Fatal fighters

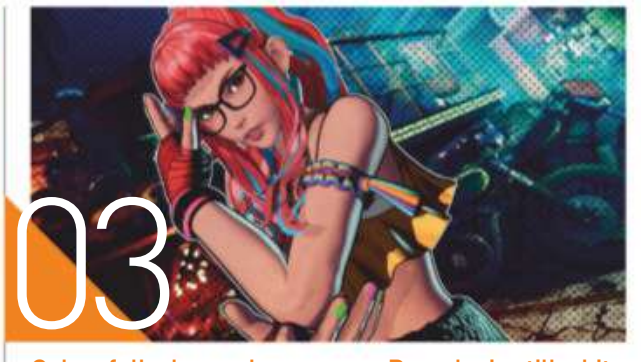
01

Terry Bogard was the only returning character from the Fatal Fury series in MOTW, though he'll still check you're okay before unleashing Buster Wolf.



02

Hotaru Futaba returns from MOTW. Though she looks calm, don't mistake this demeanour for meekness as her Chinese martial arts pack a heck of a punch.



03

Colourfully dressed newcomer Preecha is still a bit of a mystery. As a scientist and Muay Thai fighter, she's got both brains and brawn – a deadly combo.

"THIS SEQUEL EXCEEDS THE SCOPE OF THE ORIGINAL TO AN ENORMOUS EXTENT."

Nemesis might be Melinoë's ally, but she's also a rival of sorts. Can you prove yourself to her?

FORMAT TBC / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** SUPERGIANT GAMES
DEV SUPERGIANT GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

Hades II

Like a bat into hell, Hades is back

Our first few encounters in Hades II are awkward and stumbling, protagonist Melinoë hacking clumsily at nearby ghouls. But as we start to move through the woods of Erebus, our muscle memory of the original game begins to flow back into our fingers. Soon Melinoë is weaving devastating attacks in between blistering dashes, carving up the legions that stand between her and her quarry.

You won't be surprised to learn that Hades II owes a lot to its predecessor. Zagreus' rebellion against his father is a thing of the past, but nifty movement and a taste for fast-paced combat seem to be family traits. Melinoë, Zagreus' sister and the daughter of Hades and Persephone in the Greek myth that shapes this roguelike sequel, moves and fights in almost exactly the same way as her brother, striding confidently between foes to cleverly position different fast-paced attacks, while dodging bullet-hell-style enemy retaliations. But while she'll feel familiar to Hades veterans, she has a few tricks all of her own up her sleeve.

Melinoë wasn't raised in the house of her father. Instead, she was trained by Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft. That mystical upbringing means she has a few more moves than Zagreus; basic melee and special ranged attacks are joined by casts – spellcasting helps Melinoë keep foes at arm's reach. It's a great addition, allowing you to show off your skills in stylish fashion in some of the more chaotic encounters, as Melinoë divides and conquers large groups of enemies rather than hacking indiscriminately through them.

Those basic abilities are further augmented by Omega casts, which have empowered effects but take time and mana to cast, presenting you with an interesting risk/reward situation in trickier fights. Of course, they're also affected by a returning gaggle of gods. Brought to the screen in Supergiant Games' signature larger-than-life style, the likes of Zeus, Poseidon, and Aphrodite are joined this time by some new faces; Apollo, Hestia, and Hephaestus offer their own boons to help your runs along, from scorching fire damage to explosive blows of the smith god's mallet.

FACTRICK

1. ONE AND DONE

Hades II is Supergiant Games' first sequel, despite the studio's highly acclaimed back catalogue.

2. TITAN UP

The game draws upon Greek mythology's founding tale: the fall of Chronos and rise of the more familiar gods.

3. HADES JR.

Little-known protagonist Melinoë is a bringer of nightmares in the poems she originates from.

HISTORY LESSON

In the first game, the gods felt like little more than a helping hand pushing Zagreus forward, but in Hades II they're tied far more closely into the narrative, their presence part of a far grander overarching arc than Zagreus'. Melinoë's crusade is against Chronos, the Titan Of Time. In Greek myth, Chronos attempts to thwart his prophesied demise at the hands of his children – Zeus, Poseidon, Hestia, Hera, Demeter, and Hades – by eating them as babies. We could go on to tell how the

TRACK RECORD Hades might be its best-known work, but Supergiant Games is an indie powerhouse. Bastion, Transistor, and Pyre are all classics that make this one of the most exciting studios currently developing games.

great war of the Titanomachy eventually placed Zeus upon the throne of Olympus, but suffice to say this much: Chronos' plan fails, and those children rise up against their father.

Hades II, however, takes place untold centuries after that uprising, and ol' Chronos has had plenty of time to consider his eventual revenge – against both the children who overthrew him *and* the Fates who prophesied his failure. At the opening of the game, Chronos has already had his revenge upon Hades and his family. As a result, Melinoë, with the help of Hecate, is fighting her way down to the very depths of Tartarus that her brother once tried to flee in an attempt to undermine Chronos' renewed assault against the home of the gods on Olympus itself.

GODLIKE

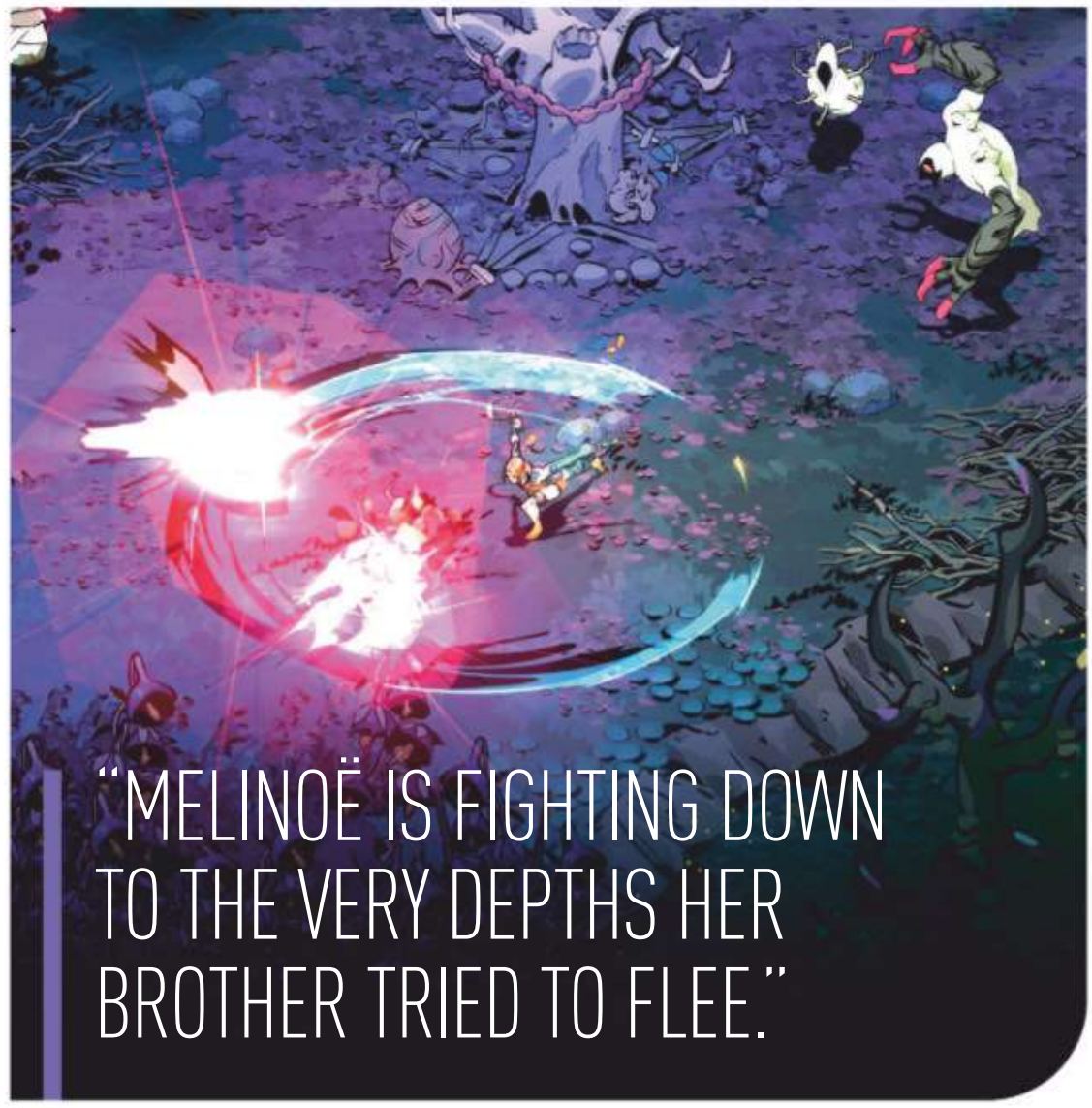
The result is a narrative that's far more ambitious than the preceeding game's, despite adhering to roguelike genre conventions that rarely veer towards in-depth storytelling. But the story isn't the only part of Hades II that's bigger than what's come before. This is a sequel that exceeds the scope of the original to an enormous extent; resource-gathering and farming systems loop in alongside more in-depth progression systems that marry perfectly with the storytelling excellence that set the original Hades apart. And as Melinoë progresses, that scope continues to broaden, experiences big enough to be their own entire game hidden within – if you can take each run far enough, that is.

All of what made Hades special is present in Hades II. And while this sequel treads so close to aspects of its predecessor that you might initially think it's virtually the same game, it's not long before it proves to be grander and more ambitious at almost every turn. Combat and narrative combine to nail the 'one more run' feeling that's pivotal to roguelikes, but stitched within them is a gameplay loop that actively encourages you to go again. Each run is a joy, but Supergiant makes sure that all of your individual attempts feel part of a broader tapestry. PC early access is set to run throughout 2024, but Hades II is already a truly exceptional roguelike.

IMPRESSIONS

Hades II does everything right. This is a sequel that brings back the moment-to-moment action of the original game, but is more ambitious than its predecessor in almost every way you can name.

1 Some of Artemis' boons involve her laying down support fire from off-screen – the goddess of the hunt wields a mean bow and arrows. 2 Sea god Poseidon's splashy powers can keep you from getting swarmed by enemies. 3 Magic is vital for Melinoë's builds, as every attack can be charged to a spelltastic degree – her time with Hecate wasn't wasted. 4 Flip and equip tarot cards to give Melinoë some big buffs for a run.



"MELINOË IS FIGHTING DOWN TO THE VERY DEPTHS HER BROTHER TRIED TO FLEE."

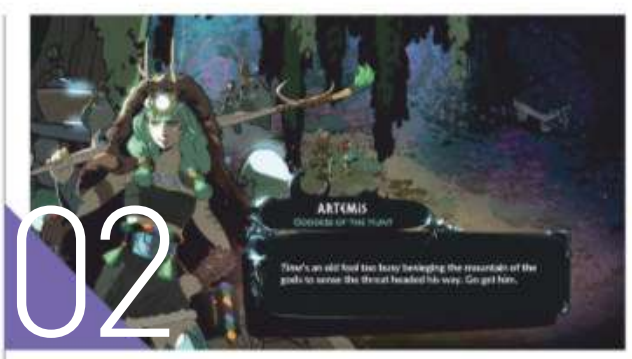
Triple H

These new gods have something in common

HECATE
And whyever not? To safeguard the realm, you shall have to clear a wide variety of obstacles standing in your way. I am but one.

01

Hecate took you in and trained you up. More hindrance than help in your quest, the pointy-hatted goddess of magic is key to Hades II's story.



02

Rather than hanging around in Olympus, Artemis is out and about in Erebus' forest, as befits the goddess of the hunt, and is happy to help if you meet her.

03

Hestia, the flame-haired goddess of the hearth, is a matronly figure with a fiery temper that helps burn enemies to a crisp. One red-hot mama.

There have been multiple studies on how smart crows are, which makes them both cute *and* incredibly dangerous.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **/ ETA** TBC **/ PUB** UNBOUND CREATIONS **/ DEV** UNBOUND CREATIONS **/ PLAYERS** 1

Just Crow Things

Stick your beak in as a cute crow, and cause chaos

Chaotic animal sims should be a well-defined genre at this point. We've played as a disgruntled goose in Untitled Goose Game, a ravenous possum in Pizza Possum, and a raccoon out for revenge in Donut County. Well, you'll be taking your reign of chaos to the skies in this upcoming animal adventure.

You play as a curious crow wearing a snazzy yellow bandana, out to cause ultimate mayhem and maybe help some friends along the way. In the game's opening level, our bird bud is let loose in a small town filled to the brim with opportunities for corvid-caused calamity. There are plenty of other animal pals to meet, offering a shopping list of tasks to complete on the way to becoming birds of a feather. But the real fun of Just Crow Things is in being the worst kind of feathered gremlin imaginable.

FACTRICK

1. ANTI-BIRD BRIGADE

Beware of humans with brooms as they will whack you. Hand us the pop – they will pay for this.

2. MAGIC MISSILE

Your crow chum can swoop to gain speed, which is incredibly handy when you need to strike fast.

3. CROW COUTURE

You can customise your crow with hats and accessories, and even change the pitch of their squawk.

THE FLIPPING BIRD

During our time as a crow, we set fire to an old woman's storefront, destroy a children's birthday party, and poop on the head of just about every human in town. Sometimes you'll need to find specialised tools and objects to carry out your crow crimes, like an overclocked leaf blower or a spray can that'll really let you leave your mark on the town.

You can also consume items to affect your bird's... let's say 'output'. Drinking fizzy drinks enables you to fart for a burst of speed, and eating a chilli pepper will give you flaming poo grenades, causing even more distress to the humans just trying to live their lives quietly below.

When you're not vandalising the town, ticking off the tasks on your list will grant you reputation points. When you have enough points, you can zip to the next level for a fresh sandbox to wreak havoc upon. You can take your chaos-creating tour worldwide, too, as other locations in the full release will include Ancient Egypt, New York, and the French Riviera.

The only thing holding Just Crow Things back is that it currently feels (and looks) a little rough around the edges. During our hands-on our crow often gets stuck in small spaces between things, and the controls are a little clunky. But the game's is still in active development, so we hope these issues will have been preened out by the time developer Unbound Creations unleashes the full power of its crow sim. For now, Just Crow Things mines mischief aplenty, and we're looking forward to it fully taking flight.

IMPRESSIONS

A sandbox adventure that follows in the footsteps of other chaotic animal sims, Just Crow Things finds the same childish fun in being a nuisance to humans. But it's not like we don't deserve it.

TRACK RECORD Seattle-based studio Unbound Creations released three games before Just Crow Things: news sim Headliner, cloud-based puzzle game Rain On Your Parade, and comedy adventure Leaf Blower Man. Of those, only the first came to PlayStation.

1 A fellow delinquent, this lemur encourages you to graffiti the town. **2** Due to your lack of bling, your fellow crows find you incredibly un-cool. **3** Drinking coffee will give you unlimited poo projectiles for a limited time. **4** The first level is clearly inspired by traditional Japanese architecture.

Kitted out

Get to know your crow arsenal

01

An instant chaos starter, the blowtorch enables you to set fire to your surroundings: trees, telephone poles, dustbins... if it's flammable, you can torch it.

02

Is a particular human causing you trouble? Just wallop them with a baseball bat and that'll sort them out. Only one being's allowed to cause trouble here!

03

We're not sure why acorns explode in this world, but they do. They detonate as soon as they hit the ground, so be careful where you drop them.

"APPROACHABLE TO NEWCOMERS AND HAS A LOT OF DEPTH FOR SEASONED FIGHTING GAME PLAYERS."

Tagging in players isn't only strategic, you can even perform combos – to an extent – by tagging back and forth.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2025 / **PUB** RIOT GAMES
DEV RIOT GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1-4

2XKO

Can Riot Games shake up the fighting game scene?

Although it's better known on PC, where the rigorous multitasking and twitch reflexes required by MOBAs and FPSs feel at home on keyboard and mouse, that hasn't stopped developer Riot Games from attempting to bring its best-known series League Of Legends to new audiences, be that via smaller spinoffs like 2021's Ruined King or the excellent Netflix animated series Arcane. 2XKO is set to be its boldest attempt yet

The studio as a whole may be new to the fighting game ring – and facing a tough battle as it's going up against heavyweights like Street Fighter, Tekken, and Mortal Kombat, all of which have decades of characters, lore, and fandom behind them – but the acquisition of staff from the cancelled Radiant-Entertainment-developed fighter Rising Thunder has given the project extra punch. On top of that, as the game's set in LOL's Runeterra, 2XKO's developers have a terrific foundation of striking character designs and plentiful lore to build upon.

FACTRICK

1. COMBAT EVO

2XKO's creators Tom and Tony Cannon are two of the co-founders of fighting game tournament Evo.

2. NET COOL

Tony created the rollback netcode program GGPO that's used in many retro and new fighting games.

3. HI-JINX

Despite being shown off in earlier footage, 'Loose Cannon' Jinx is not officially on the roster yet.

CONTROL YOURSELF

While recent fighting games have introduced simplified control systems to cater to newcomers intimidated by traditionally complex command inputs, they also still have to honour the legacy of those original controls to maintain the interest of longtime fans. The unintended result is that compromises have to be made (for example, allowing easier supers with reduced damage) or unfavourable connotations attach to one of the control types (if simplified controls are 'modern', does that make 'classic' old hat?). Riot Games avoids that by giving 2XKO a single control scheme, constructed specifically for it, that is both approachable to newcomers and has a lot of depth for seasoned fighting game players.

There aren't any quarter-circle motions, then, but when it comes to normal attacks you still have light, medium, and heavy (there's no distinction between punch or kick) to choose from. Then there are two dedicated special buttons are mapped to L1 and R1, the specials varying depending on whether you're just tapping or holding it or when holding a direction, such as ↓ and L1 for Darius' anti-air, or back (← or →, as appropriate) and R1 for swordsman Yasuo to create a wind wall. Ultimates, meanwhile, simply require tapping ↓ twice followed by either or both special buttons (the latter, naturally, being the strongest, meter-guzzling, screen-filling ability).

One clever thing is that stringing combos together requires a bit of rhythm to your button presses, which we're told was included as a way to offset the time usually spent making directional inputs. So definitely don't write this off as a button-masher. Instead of honing

TRACK RECORD Riot Games is best known for MOBA League Of Legends and competitive shooter Valorant on PC, but LOL spin-offs, including Ruined King and The Mageseeker, have made their way to PlayStation.

your muscle memory and input execution, your timing and spacing will carry you to victory.

TAG, YOU'RE IT

But let's come to the reason behind 2XKO's absurdly on-the-nose title. This is a 2v2 tag-fighter, or as Riot refers to it, an assist-based fighter, where you select two characters for a match and can swap between them à la Marvel Vs Capcom. The assist element is because in addition to being tagged in, your partner can also function as an assist. By holding ← or → with ⊗, they swoop in to perform an assist attack, which can be really effective when used at the end of a combo. Then by tapping tag again, you can switch to control to them that way. You can, however, hold down the button for a more traditional quick tag-in.

The secret sauce to this is that this isn't only a tag fighter but a co-op one, where you can team up with another player locally or online. It's an idea that makes perfect sense given Riot's history of team-based games, while players perhaps used to having one main can still play confidently without the pressure of having to learn another fighter. It's also possible to play co-op against a single opponent or vice versa.

Exactly how does that work in practice? There are cooldowns so that you don't get into a tagging frenzy, but in addition the on-screen fighter is the one who gets to decide when they're going to tag in their partner. The off-screen player should, however, keep a close eye on the action because they can decide when to come in to perform an assist. Meanwhile, all the tag mechanics are available whether you're playing solo or in co-op. For instance, your downed partner can still swoop in to make a Last Stand attack if you're below half health – a literal case of being down but not out.

If we initially faced this new fighter on the block with some reservations, we're surprised by how smartly its systems all come together, and how much fun it is. With many more fighters from the LOL universe surely set to join the fray and the likelihood that, like Riot's other online releases, this will all be free to play, 2XKO should make its rivals quake.

IMPRESSIONS

With strong visuals, approachable but deep controls, and a smart tag and assist-based system that works well solo and in co-op, this is a riot of a fighter that could start a revolution for the genre.

1 Backdrops have a softer, painterly look, allowing the cel-shaded fighters, with their strong lines and colours, to really pop. 2 Expect some fighters to have their own unique mechanics, such as Ahri's Foxfire projectiles. 3 Positioning is always important in fighting games, from cross-ups to anti-airs. 4 Scraps can hectic, with up to four fighters on screen. Grey health can be recovered when in reserve, however.

Players familiar with the mainline LOL should be pleased at how champions' abilities translate to specials and ultimates here.

"A CO-OP TAG-FIGHTER MAKES PERFECT SENSE GIVEN RIOT'S HISTORY OF TEAM-BASED GAMES."

Champions assemble

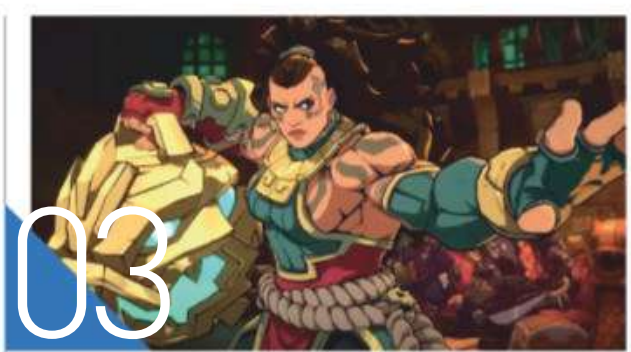
A taste of League's champion fighters

01

Ahri is a fox-like vastaya who plays as a quick and aggressive spellcaster. She's great in the air, with plenty of moves designed to pressure opponents.

02

Ekko hails from the rough streets of Zaun, and excels in melee-based mix-ups. His invention, the Z drive, also allows him to manipulate time to his advantage.



03

Illaoi is a heavy hitter who wields a massive totem. She can use this to summon spirit tentacles to attack her opponents, making up for her slower movement.

HANDS-ON STAR CHARTS

We go hands-on with Ubisoft Massive's open world **Star Wars Outlaws**, and punch into hyperdrive to revisit the journey that took us here. From gaming's earliest days all the way through to PS5, Star Wars is as much a gaming institution as it is a cinematic phenomenon

Back in 1972, two stark shapes cleaved their way through black space, simultaneously hurling blasts back and forth. That was Pong. It changed gaming forever. Only five years later, in 1977, the film titled simply Star Wars would do the same for movies and pop culture.

Impressive technology was just as much a part of Star Wars as its narrative – the film perfected special effects techniques. So too did games go from technical feat to technical feat. Many of the early Star Wars gaming successes, such as the 1983 arcade rail shooter in its iconic cockpit cab and the Atari shooters and 8-bit platformers, have yet to be ported to PlayStation (and that cab is now eye-wateringly expensive).

The series has been embedded in videogaming throughout most of the medium's life. From close adaptations of, and tie-ins to, the big cinema releases to spin-offs that developed Star Wars' expanded universe as much as the bevy of licensed novels and comics did, Star Wars has done it all in gaming – though EA's exclusivity deal from 2013 did bring that experimentation to a standstill for a period.

With the IP open for business once more and Ubisoft's Star Wars Outlaws set to join the lineup, are we on the cusp of a new age? Join us as we chart the course and go hands-on with what's next.

MOVIE MAGIC

The earliest taste of Star Wars gaming we have predates the original PlayStation, as 1992's Super Star Wars was eventually rereleased for PS4. Based solely on Episode IV, the 15-year gap between movie and game doesn't detract from it as an adaptation. Rather, it enhances it.

The leap from 8-bit to 16-bit was truly revolutionary, the extra pixels allowing developers to cram loads more detail and colour into games. Mostly a run-and-gun platformer, Super Star Wars utilised the Mode 7 chip for impressive 3D-like sections, meaning the iconic Death Star assault really comes to life. References to later movies, such as a Sarlaac boss fight in the Tatooine level, even sneak in.

As is common for tie-ins, rather than sticking rigidly to the plot of A New Hope it builds out from it in order to deliver the variety players would expect, but whether that's leaping over womp rats as Luke Skywalker or blasting through an Imperial Hangar as Chewbacca, it evokes the spirit of the movie. The only downside is that Super Star Wars alone came to PS4, with its two sequels yet to make the jump.

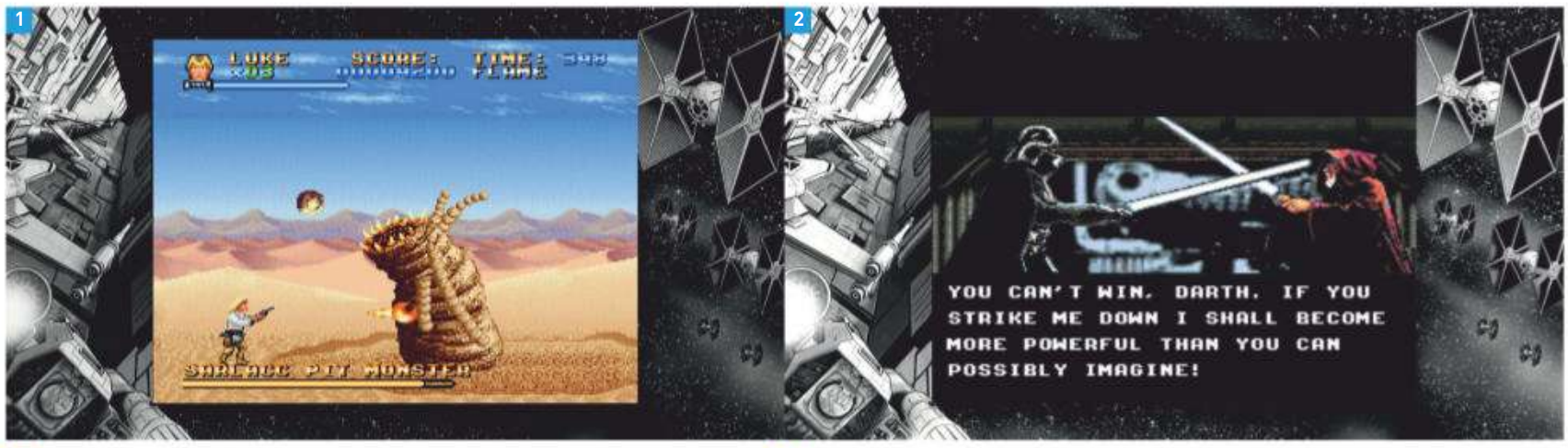
GETTING MENACED

Star Wars was absent from cinemas from '83 to '99, meaning the first games on PlayStation were based on the expanded universe rather than films themselves (and we'll talk more of those later). But when Episode I arrived on the scene, it brought with it a mandate for a merch explosion, videogames included. Which meant a direct film-to-game adaptation that was released immediately after the movie: the aptly titled Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace.

"WHEN EPISODE I ARRIVED, IT BROUGHT WITH IT A MANDATE FOR A MERCH EXPLOSION."

Developer Big Ape Productions took on the task. It had previously worked with LucasArts on Herc's Adventures, a spiritual successor to Zombies Ate My Neighbours (which had itself been made by LucasArts – the LucasFilm subsidiary had a keen interest in gaming from its early days, and also developed the Monkey Island and Indiana Jones games). Ditching the cartoon aesthetic of Herc's Adventures in favour of more realistic visuals [*For the time, we promise!* – ed], The Phantom Menace nevertheless retained a top-down perspective for its 3D world. Here, levels are more linear, though still feature nooks and crannies with secret pickups, such as guns and grenades for Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon to find.

At times it's brutally hard – whether that's simply jumping correctly through hard-to-see platform sequences with tank-like controls or that infamous


LUKE
SCORE:
TIME:
SURFACE PIT MONSTER
YOU CAN'T WIN, DARTH. IF YOU STRIKE ME DOWN I SHALL BECOME MORE POWERFUL THAN YOU CAN POSSIBLY IMAGINE!

1 More shots are fired in the first stage of Super than the original movie. 2 There's something beautiful about a 16-bit rendering of a movie scene.

THE BIG SCREEN

Don't speak Star Wars? Here's a brief run-down of the flicks in release order to help you navigate their gaming counterparts

STAR WARS: EPISODE IV – A NEW HOPE (1977)

It all began here. A young boy, Luke Skywalker, dreaming of adventure, discovers he possesses hidden Jedi force powers, and aids the rebellion in destroying the fascist Empire's enormous, planet-destroying Death Star weapon. The episodic subtitle, added in '81, bestowed extra mystique.

STAR WARS: EPISODE V – THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK (1980)

Bigger, better, special effectier – from the stop-motion AT-AT walkers in the snow to Henson Workshop's swamp-dwelling Yoda, Star Wars came to life as a true universe here. Heaps of expert melodrama (Han! Daddy Vader!) led to a downbeat yet steely sequel-teasing ending.

STAR WARS: EPISODE VI – THE RETURN OF THE JEDI (1983)

The disdain of some for the cute-yet-menacing Ewoks can't detract from this succession of spectacular escapades, from a raid on Jabba's desert palace to duels on a space station. Lightsabers clash, and the evil Emperor is hurled into an engine.

STAR WARS: EPISODE I – THE PHANTOM MENACE (1999)

After years in carbon freeze, this prequel began the explanation of how Darth Vader and Luke came to be. A huge leap for CGI, with fun choreography and worldbuilding, it made Star Wars feel bigger than ever, though stiff politicking and comic relief Jar Jar Binks chafed for many.

STAR WARS: EPISODE II – ATTACK OF THE CLONES (2002)

Featuring an older Anakin Skywalker (Vader-to-be), dramatic irony reveals this story to be the turning point for the galaxy, when the Jedi fell and the Empire rose. The allure of Christopher Lee's sinister Count Dooku, a complex former Jedi, doesn't save this strangely factory-heavy CG-fest.

STAR WARS: EPISODE III – REVENGE OF THE SITH (2005)

The chemistry between Anakin and his teacher Obi-Wan makes the former's fall from grace here all the more tragic as he finally becomes the villainous Darth Vader. Some great action also elevates this, though so much happens that it never really comes together on screen.

1 Tanks, starfighters, and Jedi – you'd be surprised how similar they are to control in The Clone Wars. 2 Episode I is frustrating... but deflecting blaster shots back at droids feels great. 3 Obi-Wan's combos remain civilised.

escort mission. Nonetheless, whirling a lightsaber around and dispatching legions of droids by deflecting their fire is as satisfying today on PS5 (you can download it) as it was at the turn of the millennium. The devs' bizarre choice to allow your Jedi to mow down citizens remains oddly humorous, the sort of strange rough edge you don't see as often these days.

A TANK, YOU ARE

Episode II's PS2 tie-in game is an odd one, as it begins right where the movie ends (though it was released just a few months after). Named Star Wars: The Clone Wars, it's one of the earliest Star Wars products to bear the name, released a full year before Genndy Tartakovsky's animated shorts, and before the long-running TV series.

Beginning with the battle for Geonosis at the end of Episode II, it follows Jedi Mace Windu, Anakin Skywalker, and Obi-Wan as they lead various battles throughout the titular wars. Developed by Pandemic Studios, which would go on to create Star Wars: Battlefront, this was a more action-centric take on the 3D RTSes it was known for (such as Army Men RTS). All about arcade blasting, it's so vehicle-centric that when you play as Jedi they control the same as the tanks. Multiplayer modes include the distinctly Battlefront-flavoured Conquest mode.

The Collective took point on PS2's Star Wars: Episode III – The Revenge Of The Sith. Known for licensed action games like Buffy The Vampire Slayer and Indiana Jones And The Emperor's Tomb, it was a solid studio to take on a fairly straightforward adaptation (which was actually released a week before the movie). This was the year of Devil May Cry 3 and God Of War, and a devotion to lightsaber-and-force combos makes this adaptation feel of a piece with those. To expand the movie to game length sections such as a duel with original character Serra Keto were added, and it was possible to play through scenes deleted from the film.

It's odd that we stop here, in 2005. What about the sequel trilogy that ran from 2015 to 2019? What indeed. By the time PS4 launched in 2013, the nature of tie-in games had changed, meaning Lego adaptations are the closest we got (more on those if you turn the page). Eclectic, and as noughties as they come, the tie-ins here, all from different studios, remain a fascinating window into another era of licensed releases.

STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS (2008)

Set between Episode II and Episode III, this animated kids movie introduces Ahsoka Tano as Anakin's padawan, and served as a pilot for an eventual seven-season TV series that would do much to build out the prequel era's characters and world.

STAR WARS: EPISODE VII – THE FORCE AWAKENS (2015)

Made after Star Wars was acquired by Disney, this fun romp retreads a lot of the original trilogy's ground, with flashier effects, centring on the fall of the New Republic and the rise of The First Order (whose members espouse the fallen Empire's values), led by a masked force user.

ROGUE ONE: A STAR WARS STORY (2016)

This prequel began an attempt to plug the gap between new numbered releases with spinoffs. Set just before Episode IV, this thriller centres on the desperate attempt to obtain the Death Star's blueprints. It led to the even better Andor TV series, also a prequel.

STAR WARS: EPISODE VIII – THE LAST JEDI (2017)

Adored by some and maligned by others, The Last Jedi at least took swings. A grumpy, much older, Luke has become disillusioned by the Jedi Order, as Rey learns when she comes to him for tuition, while everyone else has B-plots that never quite coalesce but are fun to watch.

SOLO: A STAR WARS STORY (2018)

Fairly toothless and pandering (needlessly over-explaining many things from the originals), this prequel is nevertheless a fun and action-packed adventure. Alden Ehrenreich and Donald Glover are excellent young castings of old favourites Han Solo and Lando Calrissian.

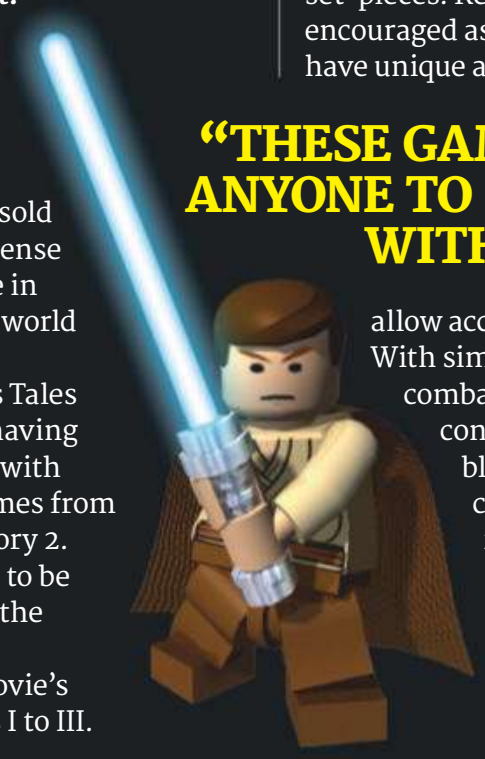
STAR WARS: EPISODE IX – THE RISE OF SKYWALKER (2019)

The pandering to nostalgia of Episode VII strikes back, uniting most of Episode VIII's lovers and haters in thinking this was a mess. Surprise revivals, sidelined plot points, and boring fetch quests might be the reason the sequel trilogy era has hardly been touched since.

BRICK BY BRICK

Episode I was accompanied by a massive amount of merch, from dancing dolls to two equally infamous Jar Jar tongues (one you suck, the other you pull). Little of it was as successful as the partnership with Lego. At the time, licensed Lego kits were a rarity – the Star Wars ones were among the first.

And the collaboration was lucrative. Even though the kits were mostly based on the prequel trilogy, they sold so well that it made sense to explore the licence in the already-thriving world of Lego videogames. Developer Traveller's Tales took on the project, having already proven itself with multiple licensed games from A Bug's Life to Toy Story 2. Episode III was about to be released in cinemas; the game was not just an adaptation of that movie's story, but of episodes I to III.



Playing out almost as a parody, with unvoiced slapstick comedy scenes (and playable in co-op all the way through), it's stuffed with Easter eggs and references that show the studio's love for Star Wars.

Only a few levels are devoted to each movie, based on the most memorable set-pieces. Replaying levels is encouraged as unlockable characters have unique abilities, some of which allow access to secrets. With simple platforming and combat, and unpunishing consequences (if you're blown to bits, your character simply reassembles), these are easy for anyone to enjoy, especially with a friend. And, thanks to the tongue-in-cheek tone, the the game even makes the sometimes-pompous prequel trilogy more palatable.

"THESE GAMES ARE EASY FOR ANYONE TO ENJOY, ESPECIALLY WITH A FRIEND."

A success, its sequel was perhaps one of the most obvious of all time, and did the same for the other Star Wars trilogy as was done for the prequels. Adapting the classic movies gave the studio even more excuse to show its team's obvious love of the series' roots, and to improve the formula. That meant more (and better designed) vehicle sections, even more reasons to replay levels with more unlockable characters, and a host of technical advancements. It was just enough of an improvement to warrant backporting elements to the original via Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga, which combined both games while bringing them to PS3, with extra levels to boot.

BRICKING IT

But where could the games go from there? Traveller's Tales had run out of Star Wars movies to adapt. This led to the studio applying the same formula to other licences (including Indiana Jones, Batman, and more) with varying

1 Now surpassing 400 characters, everyone gets a turn in The Skywalker Saga. 2 Even Anakin and Obi-Wan's fight to the death is co-op. It's memorable! 3 Hans shoots first over and over. 4 Finn, Rey, and Poe remaining charming in Lego form. 5 Lego minifigures are the perfect canvas for artistic expression.

degrees of success. Time eventually presented another opportunity, even without new live-action Star Wars to draw upon. In 2011, Lego Star Wars III: The Clone Wars adapted parts of the animated movie and key story arcs from the first two seasons of its TV show spinoff. Embracing the non-linear nature of the animated series, the game's split-branch structure allows you to pursue thwarting the villainous schemes of Count Dooku, General Grievous, and Asajj Ventress in any order you wish (though that's not the case with the PSP port).

The Clone Wars represented a big technical leap forward for Lego games; it was now possible to display loads of colourful Lego models on screen at once. Yet this game underperformed compared to its predecessors, possibly as a result of not being based on popular movies, making this a bit of a Lego hidden gem.

SEQUEL HOOK

Finding movies to adapt cleanly into Lego games continued to be a challenge for Traveller's Tales, which attempted to introduce the idea of gamifying discrete parts of a large series via games like Lego Indiana Jones: The Adventure Continues and Lego The Hobbit.

So when Episode VII released, we had Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens (developed by TT Fusion), based solely on the corresponding movie. While enjoyable enough, you can't shake the feeling that the story's been stretched thinly to fill the length of a game – the complete opposite of the cherry-picked whistle-stop tour approach taken for its predecessors. Which means, like The Clone Wars, no direct sequels adapting the rest of the material followed.

Instead, Traveller's Tales returned to the franchise for Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga. Unlike The Complete Saga, this was no straightforward collection of previous games, but a complete ground-up reimagining of all nine mainline movies with brand-new mechanics and a fresh structure.

Open world hub areas mean that outside of missions the maps are packed with puzzles to pick apart; though it does come at the cost of making a lot of the story feel like running between waypoints with only very short discrete levels. However, in retaining the series' trademark sense of humour and having a truly gigantic character list (with some possessing unique powers to ensure they were used for certain puzzles), this massive package really did feel all-encompassing; DLC packs even added characters from later TV shows. What's next? While a slapstick reproduction of Andor's tense political thriller might feel a bit odd, we're sure a Lego adventure with Mando and Grogu certainly wouldn't go amiss.

PUNCH IT

Midway through Episode I, ten whole minutes are devoted to podracing across the desert planet of Tatooine. Laden with CG, it may seem pedestrian today, but in 1999 and on the big screen it was a fast-paced thrill-ride like little else.

It's no wonder the sequence directly inspired a game. PS1's Star Wars Episode I: Racer took the zero-G chariot-like racing and sped off with it. Not only can you play as every racer in the sequence (including Ben Quadinaros, who never made it off the starting grid), but pods can be upgraded and customised using prize money. The Boonta Eve Classic from the movie is faithfully reproduced, and plenty of other planets and tracks are added to the mix.

Developed by LucasArts itself, Racer was produced concurrently with the sequence from the movie, meaning the team had to estimate based on minimal finished footage. Not only does the game have a real sense of speed, but the spindly, lightweight racers feel fragile, making every near-collision wince-worthy as you desperately try to keep your fast-moving pod together while avoiding overheating.

"EVERY NEAR-COLLISION IN RACER IS WINCE-WORTHY."

A sequel for the next-gen consoles eventually arrived in the shape of Star Wars: Racer Revenge. Development duties passed over to Rainbow Studios, which was known for muddy racers like ATV Offroad Fury. Set around the time of Episode II, it follows an older Anakin Skywalker as he butts heads with his childhood rival Sebulba once again. Serviceable, it fares badly in comparison to its predecessor – ironically, a focus on wrecking other racers makes the pods feel tankier, clumsier, and slower.

It's hard to get too upset about Star Wars: Super Bombad Racing, developed by LucasLearning. A mediocre kart racer with simple circuits and power-ups to collect, in it you play as deformed, chibi versions of Episode I characters. Yoda's in his hover chair, Darth Maul's iconic crimson noggin is a show-stealer, and it's nice to see Jar Jar respected too. It might not deserve the hate, but there's a reason it's forgettable.

1 Super Bombad Racing isn't really 'super', but Inoffensive Bombad Racing is a worse title. 2 Keeping your craft on the bridge while racing takes real skill. 3 Its textures are nicer, but Racer Revenge feels less exhilarating.

DUEL OF THE FATES

Star Wars: Masters Of Teräs Käsi isn't viable as a competitive fighting game, but it's fine to play with friends while eating pizza, the unfair moves and complete lack of balancing only adding to the hazy experience. Developed by LucasArts, ILM itself worked on the impressive motion capture… which results in sluggish bouts. Mixing weapons with hand-to-hand adds to the imbalance, but it *is* neat to activate Luke's lightsaber. Based on the original trilogy, it also pulled from the Extended Universe, with Mara Jade, Luke's love interest, even putting in an appearance.

Star Wars Episode I: Jedi Power Battles is as much co-op as it is competitive – though whoever bags the higher score for a level in this Golden-Axe-style side-scrolling brawler will feel smug nevertheless. Reimagining the events of Episode I as involving any combination of two Jedi (including Mace Windu with a blue lightsaber instead of his purple one, as he doesn't use one until Episode II, released after this), you unlock combos as you go, fighting through starships and Naboo as you mow down droids. If it wasn't for punishing platforming sequences this would be more fondly remembered.

Star Wars: Demolition, meanwhile, is a Twisted-Metal-style vehicle combat game that sees podracing banned, and Jabba The Hutt therefore devising an even more deadly sport, competitors including Aurra Sing on a swoop bike, Malakili on his rancor, and Boba Fett with his good ol' jetpack.

1 Luke Skywalker's deadliest nemesis: Jabba's guard Thok. 2 Boba Fett might be cool – but can he go head-to-head with a tank?

JEDI HOLOCRON

Since gamers could first waggle a motion controller, one idea has been constant: 'What if this could be a lightsaber?' The answer has, unfortunately, been: 'It'd be fun for a bit.' Vader Immortal was the first to give it a go, limited somewhat by the original PSVR hardware – its combat and movement can feel restrictive.

While getting up close and personal with Star Wars' space-age tech is an appealing prospect, and exploring Mustafar's temples an intriguing premise (you've been captured by Darth Vader some time after Episode III), waving the blade back and forth is just that: swooshing a laser sword around without much consequence. Shooting enemies with a blaster is somewhat more effective, as is using your force

Getting up close and personal with super-cool Star Wars tech is a plus in Vader Immortal.

powers [*Speaking of which – check out the excellent Synapse on PSVR2 if you fancy some extremely satisfying telekinetic combat* – ed].

Thankfully, these notes had been taken on board by the time Star Wars: Tales From The Galaxy's Edge landed in the next-gen VR spaceport for PSVR2's launch. This time round you're a scoundrel who's crash-landed on Batuu (the Disney Parks' original setting making a rare appearance), shooting guns your primary mode of interaction. And the combat is excellent; strapping the guns to your waist and shoulders adds some great physicality, as does using your toolkit to hack doors and fix problems. It is let down only by the very short Jedi chapters that once again feel too weightless to really properly emulate lightsaber combat – after all, who needs lightsaber stances when you can just twirl away to decimate everything in front of you? Translating Star Wars into VR isn't as straightforward as you might think, but getting the chance to be fully immersed in this galaxy is worth it.

Immersive one-to-one controls help you feel part of Tales' galaxy.

A KYLE DARKLY

Kyle Katarn. To many, the name of this recurring Star Wars character will mean absolutely nothing. But those who were fans of the expanded universe in the '90s and '00s will gladly raise their glass of Chandrilan squig in reverence.

Sauntering around the galaxy like the creation of a TTRPG player who's completely unchecked by their game master, Kyle Katarn is a no-nonsense former Imperial soldier who became one of the best mercenaries in the business. He helped obtain the Death Star launch plans. He infiltrated Jabba The Hutt's palace. Oh, and he is secretly force-sensitive and can use a lightsaber.

"SUFFICE TO SAY, KYLE KATARN'S ADVENTURES HAVE BEEN NON-CANON SINCE THE DISNEY BUYOUT."

And he's best friends with Luke Skywalker. And also the Jedi Master of Mara Jade, Luke's eventual wife. Suffice to say, Kyle's adventures have been non-canon since the Disney buyout (basically everything before 2012 is now considered 'Legends' material – often for good reason).

At any rate, Kyle has led quite the life, making even the games he's starred in hard to pin down as they span multiple genres. Naturally, the bearded heartbreaker has also starred in numerous novels, and even tabletop roleplaying games.

IT'S A DOOM

But Kyle's tale begins in Star Wars: Dark Forces on PS1, developed by LucasArts (and remastered recently by Nightdive Studios). An FPS, it takes a lot of cues from Doom, from its rudimentary 3D maps with 2D sprites to Kyle's head-bobbing as he dashes about the stages and fires from the hip.

These stages can get quite detailed – sometimes infuriatingly so as you struggle to find where to go next – and offer a variety of objectives beyond simply blasting everything as you make your way from A to B. Sometimes you need to secure an item and then extract back at Kyle's ship. Another mission has you crawling through sewers and flicking switches to track down an arms dealer in hiding. There's loads of verticality that you're able to engage with (like jumping across tricky cliff-faces), giving the game a bit more dynamism than Doom, though more potential to frustrate.

The Star Wars theming fits naturally into the FPS format. Stormtroopers cut the kind of figure you can't resist blasting at, and the Star Wars universe has plenty of futuristic guns and bombs that are fun to get destructive with – including the Stormtroopers' own blaster rifles which, as you might expect, have terrible accuracy.

HEY YA(VIN 4)

Currently unreleased on PlayStation, LucasArts' direct followup, Star Wars Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II, moved the series to full 3D and had Kyle discover his secret Jedi heritage. Nabbing a lightsaber, here he mixes both FPS-style blasting and 'saber twirling by the game's end.

By the time Raven Software came on board to continue Kyle's adventures, though, he'd done away with the Jedi thing, returning to his merc ways for Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast's opening. Raven already had plenty of FPS experience, having developed Hexen and Soldier Of Fortune, and the beginning of Jedi Outcast plays out much like a Dark Forces III would, with better 3D making the maps you blast through feel like more realised spaces (with the option to explore in third-person too if you want). But before too long Kyle meets up with Luke Skywalker in his

1 The Doom-like Dark Forces shoves Star Wars weapons in your hands and asks you to get blasting.
2 If you were best mates with Luke, you'd give fighting with a lightsaber a go too.
3 The bigger they are... the harder they'll smush you.

post-Episode VI Jedi academy and embraces the force once more. Meaning more lightsaber swinging. More built-out than in Dark Forces II, the combination of shooting and slashing here results in a really unique adventure, and it's able to support a rather fun lightsaber-clashing multiplayer mode.

Kyle takes a back seat in the followup, Star Wars Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy. Building on Jedi Outcast's customisation modes in multiplayer, here your own Jedi-to-be fronts the campaign, being taught by Jedi Master Kyle Katarn as a student at Luke's academy. As you progress you can choose how to evolve your force powers, tweak your lightsaber, and even learn new saber-fighting stances (important to any expanded universe mega-fan) – including specialising as a staff-user or dual-wielder at the end of the game. It's fun to carve your own place into the galaxy-spanning Star Wars story, but with perhaps the most in-depth lightsaber combat of any game to date the campaign also serves as onboarding for a deep multiplayer mode.

Given his decanonisation, it's unlikely we'll see much of Kyle in future. But that doesn't stop those who remember his games from hoping. Star Wars Outlaws character Jaylen Vrax bears such a striking resemblance to Kyle (as portrayed by actor Jason Court in FMVs) that fans were briefly convinced Kyle was coming back. Time will tell – if you strike him down now, Kyle will only become more powerful than you can possibly imagine.

TARGETING COMPUTER

Older games that we want to force leap onto PlayStation

STAR WARS ROGUE SQUADRON II: ROGUE LEADER

Or, ideally, all of Factor 5's wonderful arcade spaceship combat games, which play through key moments from the movies. The ships are detailed, and piloting blast runs to pick important pieces off of Star Destroyers before raining bombs down is a kick like little else.

SUPER STAR WARS: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

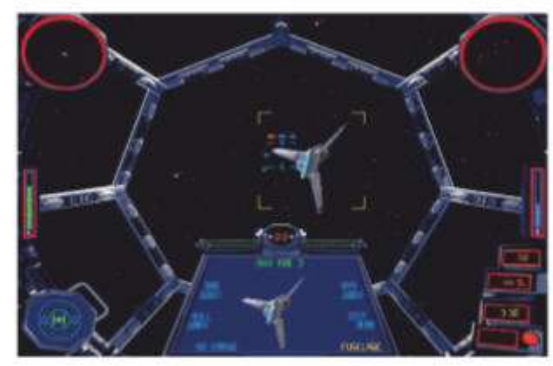
We never did get ports of the final two Super Star Wars games. It's bizarre that only the first one came to PlayStation as the experience only feels complete when you can run-and-gun through the whole original trilogy.

STAR WARS JEDI KNIGHT: DARK FORCES II

Whether or not the world yearns for the return of Kyle Katarn, it seems inevitable we'll get more of him. Given Nightdive Studios' recent (rather good) remaster of the first Dark Forces, it feels only natural that this former PC exclusive will get similar treatment.

STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

Forget the big-budget remake that appears to be in development hell for a moment. Bioware's far-in-the-past prequel deserves to be played (it feels almost like a Mass Effect Zero). As Aspyr developed a neat remaster for Switch in 2021, why haven't we had it?



STAR WARS: TIE FIGHTER

Like Star Wars: X-Wing, this Star Wars flyer is more sim- than arcade-focussed. Missions could be wonderfully routine, such as running escorts. Adventure-game-like hub elements and a neat narrative – including an appearance from Admiral Thrawn – add atmosphere.

1

BEGUN, THE WARS HAVE

Given the second word in 'Star Wars', games focussing on the large-scale conflicts in the movies were bound to be developed sooner or later. Rather than centring on big-name heroes and villains, Star Wars: Battlefront puts everyday soldiers to the fore.

Taking what it had learned from developing Episode II tie-in The Clone Wars, Pandemic Studios did away with segmented, vehicle-based missions to instead imagine conflicts as more all-encompassing experiences on focussed maps, mixing soldier classes and vehicles. And it was all geared around multiplayer, powered by the relatively new PS2 Network Adapter.

Very impressive for 2004, the simple shooting was almost a benefit, making it easier for anyone to hop in and play. Released about a year before Episode III, the Clone Wars side of the campaign was limited; the Galactic Civil War (the original trilogy) was the source of more of the ground battles. The action's built around capturing control points that double as soldier and vehicle respawns, and victory is achieved by running enemy respawns down to zero or capturing every point, giving you ample reason to explore each map. The campaign strings the maps together, though is essentially a sequence of offline battles.

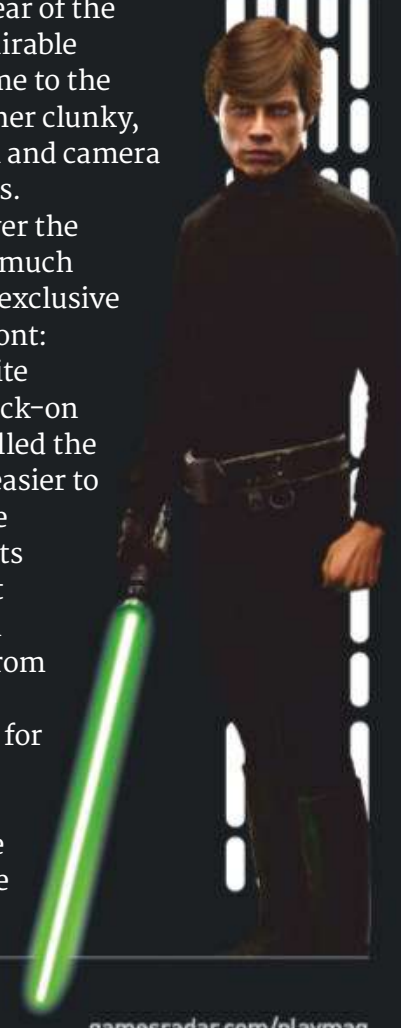
That's not true of the sequel, Star Wars: Battlefront II, which improved on pretty much every aspect of the original. Released just over a year after the first game, it feels immediately better to play, with smoother movement and easier aiming. It's almost a revised draft of the original. You can play as named characters like Boba Fett or Anakin Skywalker in special circumstances rather than just seeing them on the field as NPCs. Space battles are added (though they are a little clunky to play). There are more maps, and they're more intricate. The campaign even features unique objectives, with a storyline narrated by Temuera Morrison (Jango Fett in the movies), diving into the complexity of the clone army. (Set before The Clone Wars cartoon show, this darker tale posited that the Clones always knew they were to betray the Jedi, rather than being compelled to by a mind control chip as they are in the current canon.) Released just after Episode III hit cinemas, it charts the rise of the Empire, including extra story to connect Episode III and IV.

IN YOUR HANS

The PSP version of Battlefront II was handled by Savage Entertainment. Released within the first year of the handheld's life, it's an admirable attempt to transfer the game to the smaller device, though rather clunky, with a simplistic campaign and camera controls on the face buttons.

Rebellion Games took over the series from there, and had much longer to cook up two PSP-exclusive sequels: Star Wars Battlefront: Renegade Squadron and Elite Squadron. Using a smart lock-on system that heavily controlled the camera, these were much easier to play. They also featured the ability to customise loadouts rather than having distinct classes, and Elite Squadron allowed you to transition from ground to space maps in a single mission. Impressive for a handheld series.

Their campaigns are particularly ambitious. The former tells the story of the



1 EA DICE's Battlefront reboot remains one of the most detailed renditions of the Star Wars galaxy in a videogame. 2 Battlefront brought the series' many large conflicts to life. 3 The sequel featured loads of improvements, including the addition of space battles. 4 Battlefront II's campaign gives a taste of what a dedicated Star Wars FPS could offer.

titular Renegade Squadron, a kind of black ops rebel unit set up by Han Solo and under the command of Col Serra, which handles particularly dirty work. The latter centres on special clones X1 and X2 and how the rise of the Empire means they fight on opposite sides of the war as they come to terms with their unusual force sensitivity. Considering each game's story is only a few hours long, there's a lot packed in (maybe too much, truth be told).

The switch to handheld wasn't part of some grand scheme to go beyond consoles. Few series have had more titles cancelled during development. There's concept art for Battlefronts III and IV floating around online. Some of III's features are said to have made it into Elite Squadron; IV, meanwhile, was supposedly a 'what if' story, depicting the Jedi as dark-sided Sith, with redeemed interpretations of villains. The rumoured Battlefront Online met a similar fate. A series with ideas as big as its battles, it wasn't to be.

CONFLICT AVERSE

While sometimes less is more, sometimes less is just less. Which was the problem when Star Wars Battlefront finally returned to big consoles in 2015. The reboot was developed by Battlefield dev EA DICE; one of those perfect marriages of studio and licence. What's here is mostly great: supremely detailed renditions of Star Wars locations and models with controls so simple that anyone can jump into a skirmish.

But what's noticeable here is what *isn't* present. There's only a handful of maps and locations, almost all drawn from the original trilogy (plus Jakku, to tie in with Episode VI, released the same year). Later a few more were added via DLC (such as Scarif, to tie in with Rogue One). The absence of prequel trilogy content – most notably anything to do with the Clone Wars – was obvious, and disappointing.

"STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II INCLUDES A PROPER CAMPAIGN AND SPACE BATTLES."

The modes are also pretty basic. Supremacy is control-point-based, like in the original games, but more linear in structure, making it closer to Battlefield's own Conquest modes. While some modes are inventive, like the humorously unbalanced Walker Assault On Hoth and Heroes V Villains mode (which built out Battlefront II's fan-favourite Mos-Eisley-set mode into a smaller-scale deathmatch with named characters), overall the game lacks the ambition of the earlier titles. With no campaign to speak of, and no space battles (outside of a VR mode added in 2016), it didn't really come together.

And then sometimes more is more. It's almost uncanny how similar the relationship between the rebooted Battlefront and its sequel is to the one between the original pair, as EA DICE's followup, Star Wars Battlefront II, added a proper campaign, space battles, and other improvements.

But like the Death Star, Battlefront II had a fatal flaw: an over-reliance on microtransactions that made players feel exploited at launch, resulting in an intense, and somewhat deserved, backlash. (Current versions have done away with this; it was stripped out of the Celebration rerelease in 2019, which gave you everything out of the box plus Episode IX content.)

Returning modes felt better than ever, especially spread out across more locations. Space battles joined the fray. Galactic Assault made for bigger battles that progressed based on each team's performance in prior rounds. Playful extra modes included Ewok Hunt, in which a squad of Stormtroopers try to extract from Endor, unable to see into the night, while a team of cuddly killers mercilessly traps them under cover of darkness.

The campaign, meanwhile, bridges the gap between Episodes VI and VII, following the Empire's Inferno Squad as the Emperor falls and they become disillusioned with the cause they were fighting for, all while briefly meeting characters like Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia. Taking cues from the game's main game modes, it perhaps sometimes feels more like a nod to Kyle Katarn's FPS adventures than a single-player Battlefront. But it's still a rollicking space adventure. Factor in some of the best war fighting on console, and a community still playing, and it's time to put aside the rocky launch that undermined Battlefront II's reputation and join the fight.

OLD REPUBLIC, NEW TRICKS

Seven seasons of children's television prove that the gap between Episode II and Episode III is prime ground for storytelling. The Clone Wars, originally referenced in the very first movie to be released, take place at this point.

When civil war breaks out between the Republic and the Separatists, the Jedi are given an army of clone troopers (based on Jango Fett's DNA), apparently created in secret by the missing Jedi master Sifo-Dyas. But it's a perfect example of dramatic irony: as this all takes place within the same time frame as the prequel films, we know this conflict is actually a false flag proxy war devised by Darth Sidious in order to assume complete fascist control by forcing the Jedi to compromise on their pacifist beliefs while simultaneously creating a state of fear in the Republic.

1 Plenty of fun is had with the in-helmet viewpoint. 2 Twin-stick shooting isn't possible on PSP.

Star Wars: Republic Commando takes place in the thick of the fighting, eschewing the cartoon style of the TV show that later came to define the period in favour of something grittier and much closer to the likes of Halo or Gears Of War. And it has the chunky shooting to match. Seeing the action through a clone's visor, you're immersed in the action as you blast through bug-like Geonosians and droids alike. As Delta Squad leader Boss, you're joined by Scorch, Fixer, and Sev, who you can tactically order around, each with their own specialities. It all works surprisingly well, the focus on boots-on-the-ground action giving a fresh perspective on the Jedi, who are usually viewed in a more generous light.

Delta Squad isn't just for 2005, it's for life.

THRILL THE YOUNGLINGS

Star Wars: The Clone Wars – Republic Heroes is based directly on the TV series, meaning it's aimed at a younger audience. Developed by Krome Studios right after its excellent take on The Force Unleashed for PS2, this feels similarly snappy to play while offering simpler Jedi combat. Playable in co-op, it's split between Jedi sections, which involve more platforming, and Clone ones, which are twin-stick shooters. Plus, you can't not find Yoda earnestly teaching you about double jumps and grenades funny. The only downside is that the excellent art style of the cartoon – perfectly suited to games – is ruined here by heavy use of the PS3-era bloom lighting.

"YOU CAN'T NOT FIND YODA EARNESTLY TEACHING YOU ABOUT DOUBLE JUMPS FUNNY."

THIS IS STARFIGHTING

Jumping into a spaceship, whether that's a little fighter or a massive battleship, has always been at the heart of Star Wars. Even Vader himself was once "the best star pilot in the galaxy." While that means it's a part of the Star Wars universe always ready for takeoff, the approach developers have taken has been incredibly varied over the years.

Back on PS1, with Star Wars: Rebel Assault II: The Hidden Empire, the developers' goal was to bring the movies to life in as much detail as possible via an on-rails shooter. Developed by LucasArts and ported by Factor 5 (which would go on to work on Nintendo's Rogue Squadron games), it used PS1's CD technology to stuff two discs with live-action, blue-screened FMV cutscenes employing plenty of Hollywood talent. Brutally hard, it mixes in-ship combat (where you can swap between first- and third-person views on the fly) with following the actors onto ships for cover-based shootouts.

A few years after that game, and following the release of Episode I, the sleek new starships and battle at the end of that movie inspired LucasArts' Star Wars: Starfighter, a first- or third-person arcade shooter that has you piloting one of three ships as you uncover the conspiracy that leads to the events of the movie. Star Wars: Jedi Starfighter was a direct sequel, introducing Adi Gallia, who'd featured briefly as a member of the Jedi Council in Episode I, as a pilot who could use force powers while flying, like chaining lighting between enemy fighters.

FIGHT OR FLIGHT

Star Wars: Squadrons, meanwhile, from EA 'Dead Space' Motive, is all about flying in first person, tactically managing your fighters' power to boost your shields and weapons at the right moment, teasing the thrusters to just the right speed to either outmanoeuvre or outrun your opponents. While multiplayer dogfights are a focus, a tense campaign teaches you how to fly – all with the option to use PSVR to get into the ship yourself. (We're still desperate for a PSVR2 version.)

"ADI GALLIA IS A PILOT WHO CAN USE FORCE POWERS WHILE FLYING."

1 You can choose between first- and third-person view, but not whether you get blown to bits or stay in one piece. 2 The N1 Starfighter from Episode I looked sleek – so try flying it for yourself. 3 Squadrons' slightly simmier approach means toggling power is just as important as pulling the trigger.

SCUM AND VILLAINY

Not every gamer dreams of being a clean-cut Jedi Master. For many, the underbelly of Star Wars' galaxy holds just as much appeal, from the shady characters at the Mos Eisley cantina to the criss-crossing industrial corridors of the undercity of Coruscant, capital of the Republic. (We'll never stop dreaming of Star Wars 1313, a cancelled game that was set for PS4).

The LucasArts-developed Star Wars: Bounty Hunter, centring on Jango Fett, brought us into that world. The Mandalorian-armour-clad bounty hunter was the new Boba Fett, by virtue of being the original Boba Fett (he's his dad, and featured heavily in Episode II, which was released at around the same time). Level-based, this has you blasting and sometimes jumping around levels while clunkily switching between various gadgets, including a scanner to see if someone has a bounty on their head. You also get a little whip-cord to tie them up with.

In Star Wars: Lethal Alliance, on the other hand, you play as Twi'lek merc Rianna Saren, who teams up with droid Zeeo to complete missions for the Rebel Alliance (which are assigned by Kyle Katarn – yes, *him*). Developed by Ubisoft Montreal pre-Assassin's Creed (the studio had worked on other Star Wars handheld releases for Nintendo), this is a perfectly fine PSP adventure that's mostly about blasting your way through levels and making some clunky jumps (and sometimes zooming around on Zeeo). We reckon Star Wars games could use a little more scum and villainy… so it's a good thing Star Wars Outlaws is on the way (see p62).

1 Blasting is never quite as fluid as you'd like. 2 Lock-on helps the action flow in Lethal Alliance, even when you're playing on PSP.

THE DARK SIDE

Aren't you tired of being nice? Don't you just want to go bantha-[blorp!]?' is what we imagine was circled several times on the pitch-board for Star Wars: The Force Unleashed.

This duology is all about using the force and a lightsaber to mess up your foes in increasingly over-the-top fashion. But who are your enemies? Basically, everyone. It all takes place during the Jedi hunts after Episode III, when you – portrayed by Sam Witwer – are stripped of your name and known only as Starkiller or The Apprentice, having been indoctrinated by Darth Vader to the dark side in such secrecy that when you're air-dropped in to carry out his secret missions you take no side, dispatching rebels and Empire supporters alike.

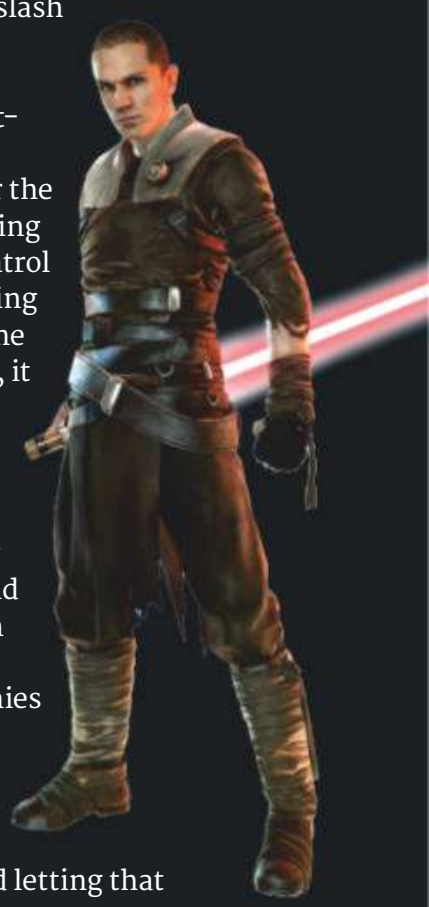
The Force Unleashed begins with Starkiller completing his training by hunting down several Jedi across different worlds (including Shaak Ti, who was killed off in a deleted scene from Episode III – unlucky). When Vader's plot to use you to help him usurp the Emperor goes sideways you're cast out on your own, tasked with helping to assemble the Rebel Alliance that would set the events of Episode IV, the very first film, into motion. Whether Starkiller carries this out in order to genuinely turn over a new leaf and embrace the light side or simply to sow chaos against the Emperor that Darth Vader can leverage is the conflict at the heart of the game (and yes, there are two different endings).

QUICKER, EASIER?

This first game, released in the waning years of PS2, actually comes in two completely different versions, one for the ageing console and one taking advantage of all the tech in the shiny new PS3. They share a storyline, characters and voicelines, and feature the same planets, but have unique level layouts and different (though similar) hack-and-slash combat systems.

Visiting Cato Neimoidia's casino cities is a great opening for The Force Unleashed II.

LucasArts itself developed the 'next-gen' version, and it looked gorgeous for the time. With an opening that puts you in control of Darth Vader tearing up the wookiee home planet of Kashyyyk, it gives you a taste of the range of powers you'll have to unlock as Starkiller – holding enemies in place and then stabbing them with a lightsaber, force choking enemies as they run at you, using force push to send wookiees ragdolling off treetop bridges, and letting that



1 Combat in the PS2 version is a little snappier than on PS3. 2 Playing as Darth Vader in the opening is memorable, especially with PS3's pretty graphics... 3 ...though at times visuals can be a bit yellow. Ah, PS3 bloom lighting, how we *don't* miss you. 4 TFU II's DLC continues the what-if scenario from the first game's packs. Meet Jedi Knight Princess Leia (who you quickly murder – gah).

lightsaber swing. Brutal stuff, though not particularly gory, the appeal lies more in watching things tumble. Unfortunately that extends to Starkiller, who can all too easily become stunlocked when pushed around.

Starkiller's powers develop beyond this, eventually including force lightning and more. Easily accessed on the face buttons, unlockable combos enable you to compound your powers to perform special actions, like juicing up your final lightsaber strike with a bit of evil lightning or force pushing away someone you were grabbing. Light puzzle-solving mechanics, often revolving around removing obstructions from your path, break up the levels.

But for the most part you're here to batter whatever moves until it stops moving, and to keep doing it until you reach your target, which becomes a more involved boss fight with some set-piece elements. Like the Episode III tie-in game, The Force Unleashed very much feels like it's living in God Of War's shadow, and the cinematic-style QTE clashes are here to prove it. But it's all done with a Star Wars flavour; it's good fun to see Starkiller and his opponent flipping around and leaping off surfaces. DLC for the game even provided some fun 'what if' sequences, such as having Starkiller face down Luke Skywalker on Hoth.

The 'last-gen' PS2 version, developed by Krome Studios, was impressive, especially in the way it still committed to having plenty of physics objects to send tumbling around the stage. As you'd expect, given the limitations of the hardware, it's a bit simpler in design, but that makes it snappier in some ways – it's just as much worth revisiting as the PS3 one. The PSP version (admirably close to the PS2 one in design) even includes historical fights that take you through key moments in the movie saga.

"YOU'RE HERE TO BATTER WHATEVER MOVES UNTIL IT STOPS MOVING."

RUN IT BACK

The Force Unleashed II follows a very similar formula, though feels immediately more responsive in the hands. Dual-wielding lightsabers doesn't change how things play much, but does introduce flashy new animation to accompany fresh combos (which are mostly about more smoothly weaving in force pushes and lightning between slashes).

Once again stripped of his identity, Starkiller must journey across new planets, this time in order to understand himself and what he wants to fight for. Levels are prettier, longer, and more varied than in the first game. The problem is a lack of variety, as you essentially have only two planets and a starship to fight through (DLC adds Endor), and it's a much shorter game overall.

The duology is melodramatic to the max, which has an appeal all of its own. Combat is simplistic yet satisfying, and does the job of making you feel genuinely like a superpowered Jedi (if Luke Skywalker had possessed a tenth of Starkiller's power the series would have been over in 15 minutes). But the games are also very much of their time – about as T for Teen edgy as PS3 games got. There's an appeal to Star Wars' darker characters, with their tragic falls and compromised morals, but they get lost in a sea of button-mashing laser-thwacking.

REBEL WITH A CAUSE

Cal Kestis lost everything he held dear thanks to two digits. When Order 66 was enacted, the Jedi who served the Republic in the Clone Wars were branded traitors and massacred, while at the same time the Supreme Chancellor Palpatine seized absolute power and turned the democracy into a fascist Empire that served the dark side of the Sith.

Those who escaped, often at the cost of seeing their only loved ones murdered in front of them, had to flee into hiding – the Jedi Order all but becoming a myth between Episodes III and IV – lest they be detained without cause and shipped off to a facility with no record of their existence.

SHIP SHAPE

Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order introduces us to Cal, who's found a life for himself disassembling old starships, his Jedi past firmly in the pod's rearview. Until, that is, his colleague and friend Prauf is almost crushed on the job and he uses the force to pull him to safety. It's not long before the Jedi-hunting Inquisitors come knocking, and Cal ends up narrowly escaping with the crew of the Mantis, led by former Jedi Master Cere Junda. She needs some force assistance to track down a missing Jedi Holocron that contains details of all known force sensitives in the galaxy so she can begin to rebuild the Jedi Order… while at the same stopping the device from falling into the hands of the Empire, which would use it to make the lives of those tracked a living hell. Fallen Order was developed by Respawn Entertainment (Titanfall), and the team led by God Of War III's Stig Asmussen and other action game veterans – and that pedigree shows.

Cue running and jumping around a variety of planets beloved by fans (Dathomir! Kashyyyk! Ilum!), mixing the considered combat of a soulslike with metroidvania-style exploration.

"NEW LIGHTSABER COMBAT STYLES AND WAYS TO LEAP AROUND ARE EXCITING."

While Cal can acquire the time-honoured gaming Jedi power of the 'double jump', he won't have it right away, meaning sections of the planets will open up periodically (if only it had fast travel…). The crunchy lightsaber combat is some of the most satisfying in the series, and the difficulty can be fully adjusted to make sure anyone can go on the adventure.

Getting to know the crew of The Mantis is reminiscent of Star Wars: Rebels, but with a more mature tone and characters that feel memorable and distinct; you grow to love them on their own terms. Each is dealing with their own trauma because of the rise of the Empire, and each is able to heal a little by sharing the load with one another. It's neatly echoed by the Inquisitors who hunt them down – they're force users with their own traumas, forced into a cycle of pain by the uncaring regime they have little choice but to serve.

FAR, FAR AWAY

The sequel, Star Wars Jedi: Survivor, builds out Fallen Order's excellent premise in just about every direction imaginable – which is more good than bad, but does introduce some flaws. Not only is it much bigger in physical scale (hub planet Koboh is a massive open world), its story is much more sweeping as well. Multiple fearsome antagonists, with their roots in multiple Star Wars eras, all come together, resulting in a high-stakes, if less personal, adventure for Cal, that doesn't quite manage to land.

However, new lightsaber combat styles and ways to leap around are consistently exciting. Fleshing out the bones of what came before (Cal doesn't really forget any powers from Fallen Order), there are some great, tricky platforming challenges here, though dashing through rings can feel a bit too gamey. Plenty of the side-content is substantial too, hiding many surprise encounters. Koboh's size also makes it home to plenty of freaky little critters who are great to get to know beyond your primary crew, froggy pal Turgle chief among them.

It's a shame that Respawn's rumoured FPS has allegedly been cancelled, but we're keen to see Cal return to cap off what could be one of the greatest gaming trilogies there is, as well as one of Star Wars' best.

FORCE POWER

Star Wars' pop-culture cache is so huge it's broken down gaming barriers

DAY OF THE TENTACLE

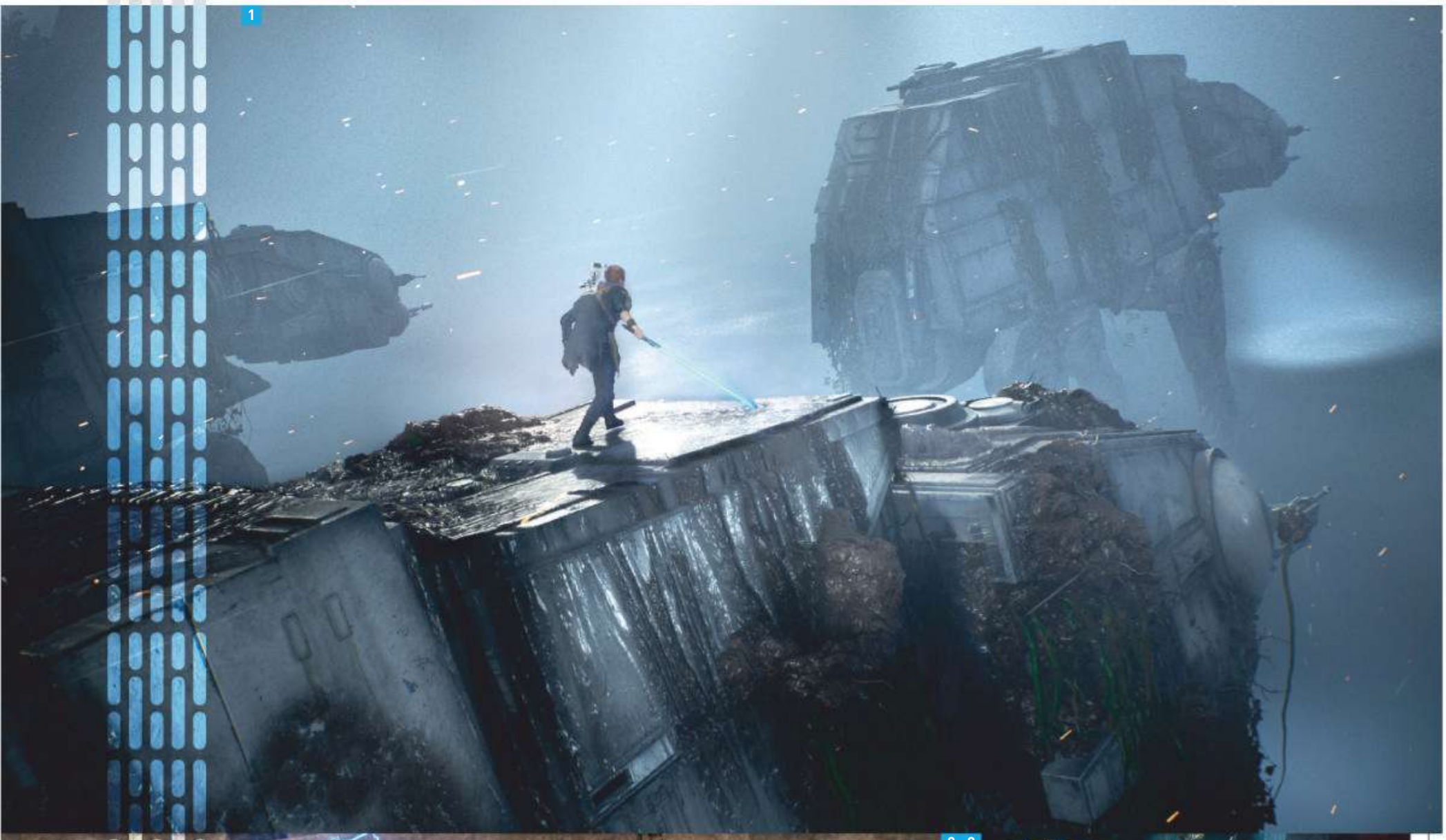
This cartoony, time-hopping LucasArts adventure game from '93 is sprinkled with fun Easter eggs of other Lucas properties, including a Darth Vader calendar and a Stormtrooper helmet. The PS4 remaster even includes a portrait of Jar Jar.

TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 3

Always two there are: a master, and an apprentice. So if Mr Hawk is a kickflip master, who's his student? Complete all goals in career mode and you'll find out it's Darth Maul, complete with Dark Jedi Grind and Sith Saber Spin moves to rack up points.

SOULCALIBUR IV

Guest characters aren't uncommon in fighters, so it's surprising Star Wars' famous faces haven't featured in more. Here, you get three: Darth Vader, Yoda, and The Force Unleashed's Apprentice – the first two were originally platform-dependent.



1 Fallen Order has brilliant set-pieces that often play with some of your favourite Star Wars toys. 2 Lightsaber combat feels powerful where it counts, making tense enemy clashes feels serious when they happen. 3 Whether on PS1 or here with Cal on PS4 and PS5, deflecting blaster bolts back at enemies is *always* sublime.

FINAL FANTASY

Alongside the likes of Cid, chocobo, and moogles, Biggs and Wedge recur constantly across the series in roles big and small. Their names are references to Luke Skywalker's fellow X-wing pilots. Just one of this RPG series' *many* nods to Star Wars.

ANGRY BIRDS: STAR WARS

You could be forgiven for thinking this was just a cash-grab reskin – you'd be partly right. But how many of those get boxed releases, and how many enhance the fundamentals of the base game? With planets bending gravity, this is a fresh force twist.

THE SIMS 4 STAR WARS: JOURNEY TO BATUU

Fiction and reality blur in this game pack that allows your Sims to take a break by visiting Batuu, the planet invented to serve as the setting for Disney Parks' Star Wars area. Characters from the movies show up... but are they merely entertainers?

Escaping this station and fleeing seamlessly into space is thrilling.

SHOOTING FIRST

Star Wars Outlaws has us stealing from the Hutts to give to... ourselves! Lex Luddy smuggles us the holocron on her first few hours with the adventure not-so-far-away

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 30 AUG / **PUB** UBISOFT / **DEV** MASSIVE ENTERTAINMENT / **PLAYERS** 1

Over-saturation can make it easy to become jaded. Even the most ardent Marvel fans found their interest waning when four movies and three TV shows were being released every year to the point that Disney has pumped the brakes on the MCU, releasing only one film in 2024. As Disney's other mega-property, it feels like Star Wars is teetering ever closer to a similar enforced hiatus. During the last five years, we've seen eight seasons of six separate live-action TV series set in a galaxy far, far away, along with seven seasons of animated shows and specials and the release of four Star Wars videogames with another four to five in development (depending on who you ask). It's a lot of Star Wars.

Hearing the words 'Ubisoft-developed open world Star Wars game,' it's easy to roll your eyes and brush Star Wars Outlaws off as another bloated checklist-'em-up, but this time with space scoundrels instead of historic assassins or freedom fighters. It's almost tempting to believe it, as who has time to juggle yet another space adventure? The problem is, having gone hands-on with Outlaws, we can assure you this is one worth burning the hyperfuel on. Whether you're looking for your next cutting-edge open world to get lost in or are a diehard Star Wars multimedia spice-head, Outlaws is going to be impossible to ignore.

"WE CAN ASSURE YOU THIS ONE IS WORTH BURNING THE HYPERFUEL ON."

STEALTHING IN

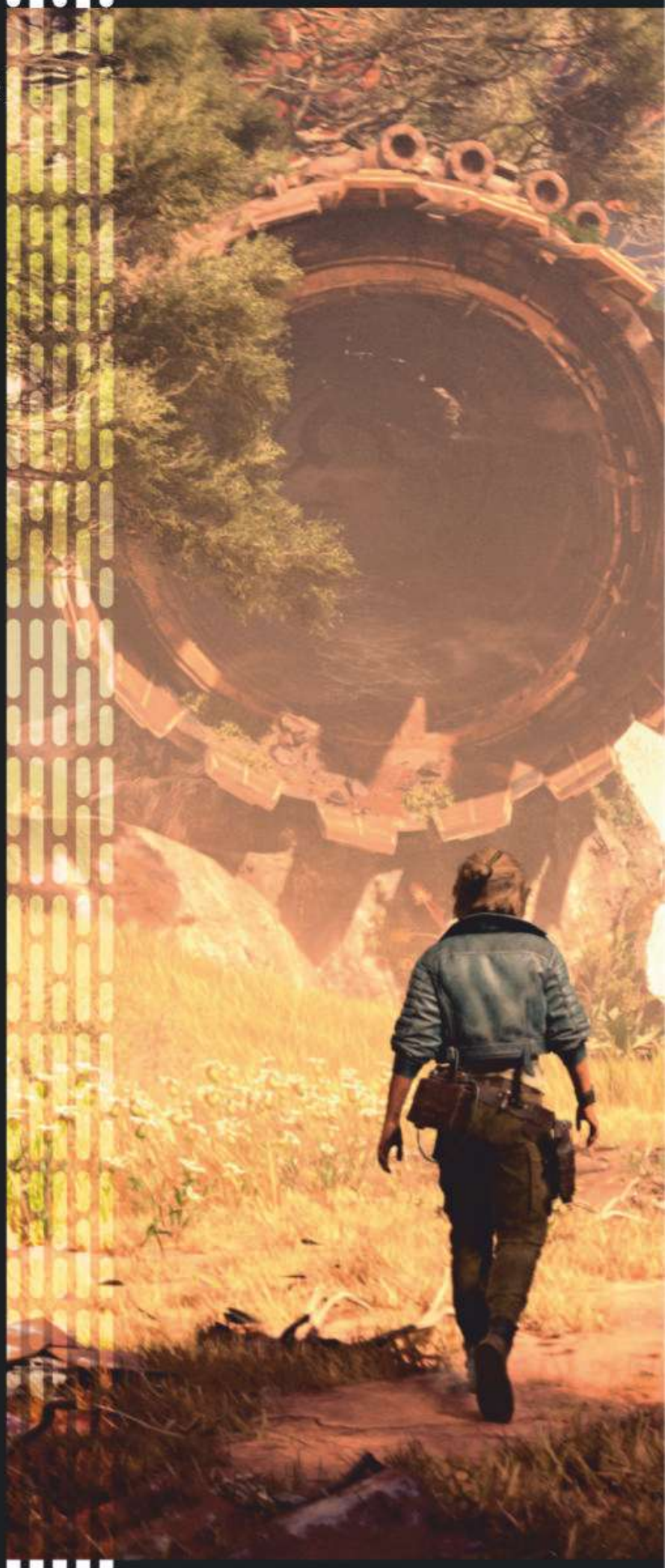
While Ubisoft landed its star cruisers in LA to showcase Star Wars Outlaws at its own event concurrent with Summer Game Fest, we managed to secure a transponder ID that granted us access to the game itself. There we got to play three distinct slices of the game, each showcasing Outlaws' distinct mechanical pillars. We left impressed by how well it blends telling the story of a dashing (if ill-equipped) scoundrel with the scale of a Ubisoft open world game to create what feels like an exciting take on the Star Wars galaxy. First was a cinematic set-piece set within a decaying crashed starcruiser. Second was what felt like a core gameplay of stealth action mixed with cover shooting. And finally we played a sequence aboard an imperial cruiser which showcased the game's ship combat and exploration.

Taking control of spunky Kay Vess (as played by Humberly González), along with her adorable alien meerkat companion Nix, our initial mission has us trying to retrieve a navigation system from an abandoned ship to repair our own. The opening of the mission plays out as a rather linear platforming sequence not far off something you would see in Uncharted, as Kay clambers through a painstakingly detailed wrecked Republic cruiser. When bounty hunters catch up to us, there's a tense chase cut off right as ND-5 (the trenchcoat-wearing droid) shows up to save Kay's skin – and not for the last time, we bet.

It might not be a gaming revolution, but it proves a good introduction to the kind of cinematic set-pieces Ubisoft is keen to intersperse between Outlaws' more freeform open world sections. It's a game based on a series of movies that's all about bombastic action sequences, and looks to be living up to that.

GETTING CREDIT

But you're not only going loud. As a thief, Kay knows the importance of flying under the radar when possible. Our next task has us infiltrating one of the game's five criminal syndicates in order to steal a treasured artefact belonging to a rival gang, so we can build our relationship with its members. Not



only does going in quietly make pulling off the job easier, it allows us to maintain a healthier relationship with the gangsters we're stealing from – how can they blame Kay for something going missing if she doesn't get caught?

The game often prompts you to begin missions with a stealthy approach. Kay can perform the classic stealth knockout if she approaches enemies unseen, and her blaster is equipped with a stun shot that drops enemies in one hit – though it requires a lengthy cooldown once used. In addition to navigating sightlines, we bypass security locks and hack computers – the former requiring a kind of rhythm-based lockpicking minigame, and the latter a spin on Wordle, albeit with Star Wars' Basic glyphs instead of English.

HAVING A BLAST

With the McGuffin pocketed, things get louder when we try to escape. Which does at least mean we can switch our blaster from its stun mode to something a little more destructive. In normal firefights Kay's blaster is capable of two types of fire: one that does damage to human and fleshy enemies, and the other more suited to taking down droids or disabling shields. This isn't a looter game – Kay's blaster is Kay's blaster – so you won't be patting down bodies on the hunt for a legendary version with +0.2 Critical Hit Damage. Instead, upgrades and different configurations and firing patterns can be unlocked as you progress. For us, the settings meant that while our normal blaster shots fired single high-damage bolts, our anti-droid mode popped off a three-shot burst.

"SHOOTOUTS ENCOURAGE YOU TO RUN-AND-GUN, FREELY SPRINTING."

Fortunately, though, Kay's hand isn't fused to her blaster alone. When you fry an enemy, they'll drop the weapon they were using, which you can pick up to blast away with until it's out of ammo. Assault rifles, stormtrooper blasters, and sniper rifles – we found plenty to scavenge while playing. Pinned down by enemy fire with a tantalising weapon just out of reach? You can send Nix out to retrieve guns dropped in no-man's-land. Though you won't often be locked down as there's no rigid cover system here; instead shootouts encourage you to run-and-gun, freely sprinting and staying on the move as you crouch and slide to evade blaster bolts.

Though this is Ubisoft's first Star Wars game since 2006's Lethal Alliance (see p57 to catch up on that one), inspiration has been taken from Star Wars titles released since – most noticeably, Outlaws has a nearly identical healing mechanic to the one in EA's Jedi: Fallen Order/Survivor. The damage Kay takes reduces a health bar that doesn't regenerate, but can be quickly healed with a tap of the D-pad to use a bacta stim pack.

Also like the Jedi games is the fact that the number of hits it takes to kill Kay isn't very high. This, paired with excellent sound design (which sounds clunking and industrial in all the right original trilogy ways) gives combat a seriously dangerous edge that demands a bit of consideration before you decide to go loud. However, it does have to be said that in the in-progress build that we play this sense of danger was somewhat nullified by the sheer quantity of healing items we found lying around at every turn.

OH, KAY!

Everything comes together as we skip ahead in the story to find Kay aboard an Imperial starship. Not docked there by choice, she's separated from her ship, the Trailblazer. Sneaking into the space-Nazi equivalent of an air traffic control room, we hack into the Imperial systems and clear her halted ship for take off. Far from simple, from there we have to hold out inside the wolf's den as waves of stormtroopers… well, storm us – all while we wait for droids to get our confiscated cargo back on board our ship.

It might sound simple, but what happens next takes our breath away: we board the Trailblazer and it flies out of the hangar and into space without a loading screen in sight. Still pursued by the Empire, we transition right into interstellar dogfighting as TIE fighters close-in. Gunning them down is intuitive enough – more complex Star Wars shipfighting is out there – but a real thrill, especially in the context of moving seamlessly from one type of conflict to the next.

From there we soar to a nearby planet, where we get a prompt to land the Trailblazer. Fog masks the entry (as well as a brief, quick cut), but it's incredibly snappy. It's a grimy outpost – much of Outlaws explores the lawless Outer Rim of the series' galaxy – but full of character. We even have enough time in our session to stumble on an in-universe arcade machine that features vector graphics and rail shooting – a nod towards the likes of Rez and Star Wars' own arcade history dating back to the '80s. It's enough of a full circle to make Yoda grunt approvingly.

For all that Outlaws features all the Star Wars things you'd expect, and even some familiar Ubisoft hallmarks, it still feels decidedly like its own thing. That's one of the greatest things about the series – beyond the movies, different developers, directors, artists, creatives, and viewpoints can play around in its sandbox and create something new, fresh, and exciting. And that's exactly what Star Wars Outlaws promises with Kay's adventure: something we've not seen before. It's a big, vibrant galaxy, it's far, far away, and it has a little something for everyone.

Luxuriously detailed, exploring this wreck feels like it cribs from Uncharted.

1 Plenty of planets are just waiting for you to explore them, including Akiva, which has only featured in Star Wars comics and novels before now. 2 Just who is ND-5? And who exactly is the trenchcoated droid working for? The BX-droid is a useful ally, but we have to wonder what stakes he has in the big heist he'll be pulling with Kay.

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Following the thread

Designers, artists, and community managers tell Holly Swinyward about the importance of cosplay when creating worlds, and how to embrace fandom

Cosplay. It's everywhere. You can't move for cosplay online, at conventions, or at fan events these days; it's great! A vibrant, living community whose members love to express their passion in the most artistic way, cosplay has been part of pop culture for as long as it's existed in its modern sense. It should go without saying that fan works (fan art, fan fic, cosplay, and so on) have evolved in tandem with gaming over the years – and as series, conventions, and budgets have grown, so too has the cosplaying fandom.

During the last few years we've seen cosplayers being involved in the promotion of games, both officially and unofficially, at games expos, launch parties, on TikTok and Instagram, and by working in community forums to help others to bring their favourite threads to life. Even the previous iteration of this very mag once featured cosplay on the cover [*Back in July 2018!* – ed].

It's even becoming the norm for game developers to release a cosplay guide in one form or another for

fans to follow – it's useful for fan artists too, by all accounts. But how much do developers consider later fan creations while designing their games? Is it simply a new avenue for marketing, or more give and take? We're taking our questions to a team dialled into some of the biggest fandoms in the world at Zenimax Online Studios and Bethesda as they prepare for the launch of The Elder Scrolls Online's ambitious new expansion, Gold Road.

As we start the conversation, even though it's through a screen, we sense there's a big feeling of love for the fan community.

1 Tamriel has never been easier to get lost in than in Elder Scrolls Online.
2 Sakuraflor showcases the new and mysterious Daedric Prince, Ithelia.

HERO SUITER

"…[F]or the entire span of ESO, we've seen lots and lots of community creations, including cosplay, come up. I will say that seeing your creations inspire others to create is a really special thing for the team," Jessica Folsom, Zenimax Online Studios' lead community manager, says. "There's nothing quite as rewarding, and fun, as seeing our characters in-game inspire these beautiful cosplay creations."

You can tell straight away that Folsom is enthused by the high fantasy world she gets to work in. You can't help but feel that at any games expo she would be down on the con floor herself, taking pictures with the fans and their creations and probably – definitely – sharing them with the group chat.

"When we discover cosplay creations, we love to share them internally with the dev team. Everybody really loves seeing them! We have our own internal Slack channel where we share that kind of stuff," says Folsom.

It wouldn't be that big a reach to say that fan works keep games alive. Some of the best-known games have been on the shelves for years, and yet they still have fandoms producing works and spreading the good word about them to newcomers; Silent Hill, with its still-theorising fans and cottage industry of video essayists, is one example that springs to mind. It's gratifying to hear from the horse's mouth quite how much these works mean behind the scenes, and that the work of fans does not go unnoticed.

"I will say that if players end up being really popular, and we see a lot of fan art and cosplay, it does give consideration to the dev team of, 'Do we want to bring this character back?'" Folsom says with a smile. "…Bringing our characters and our world to life is really cool. Some of our returning characters, we see them pop up time and time again, like the Nord hero and the Elf hero and the Breton hero [from each cinematic trailer]. We love seeing everybody's original ESO characters as well… we really love seeing how much thought and dedication goes into replicating every little detail. [We] will engage with these players on social media, when we see their posts, they pop up quite often on Twitter and Instagram, as you would expect in TikTok, as well, and we amplify those posts on our social media channels."

COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Social media isn't the only place fan works get shown off. The Elder Scrolls Online team do a huge amount of community work too, showcasing artists of all types on their website and forums. It's about celebrating the players and the characters, and platforming the amazing passion of the community – which also encourages more people to get involved in some way.

"What tends to be consistent is that they find a cosplayer [we] like or one that [we've] worked [with] before and obviously like, and they get them on board cosplaying a prominent character or whatever the cosplayer really wants to cosplay at that point from Elder Scrolls," Ella Wnuk, senior community manager at Bethesda Softworks says.

"There's nothing quite as rewarding, and fun, as seeing our characters in-game inspire these beautiful cosplay creations."

Beyond sharing craft techniques, cosplay meets are simply great places to meet like-minded fans.

2
10
STAFF

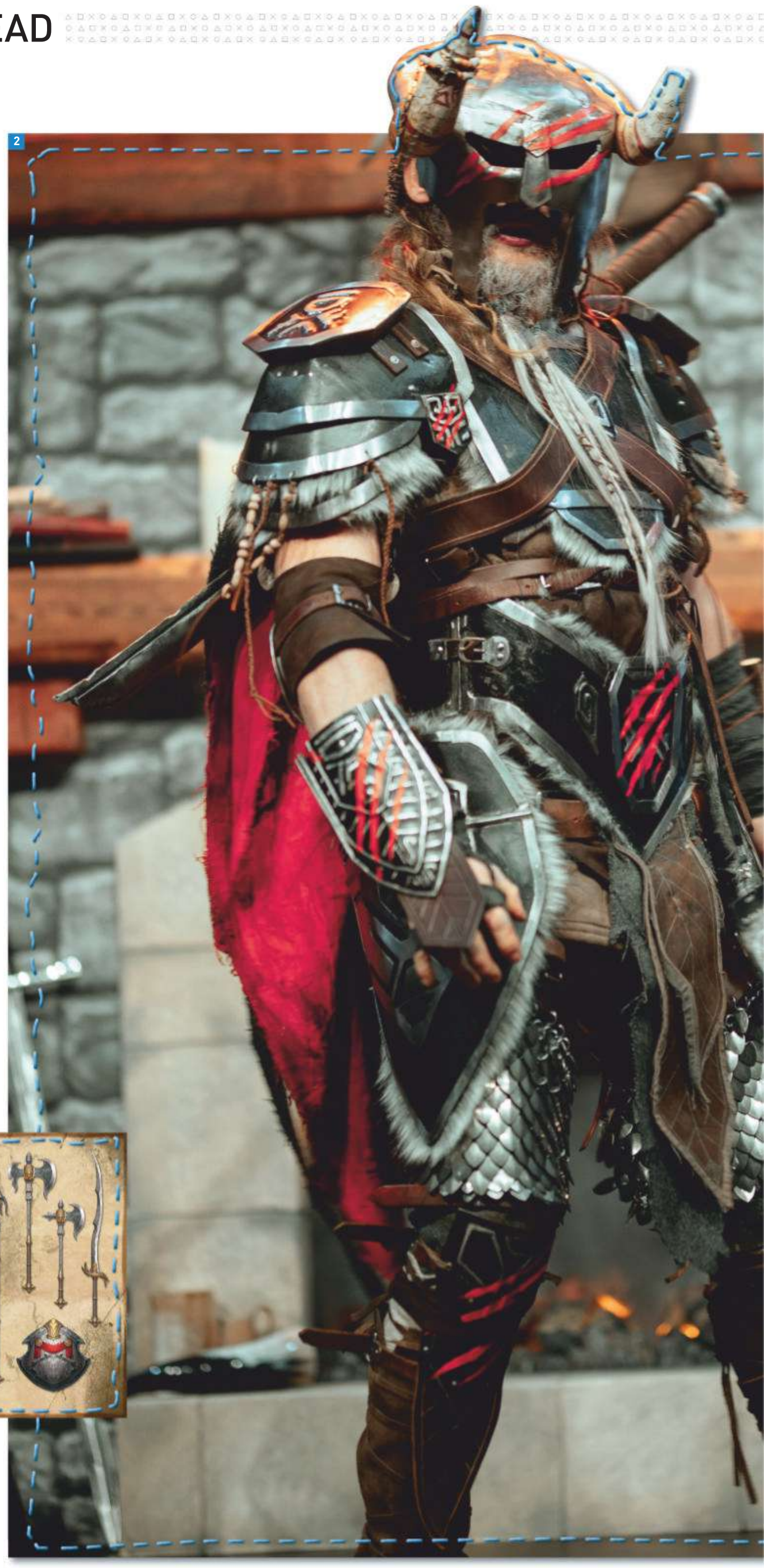
A lot of gaming companies, and beyond, are using cosplay as part of their marketing. When was the last time you saw a game launch without some beautifully dressed cosplayers showing off the new characters, or a comic con without cosplayers strutting their stuff all over it? Cosplay sells, right? However, no-one wants to feel like there's no give and take, and the ESO team have managed to strike a balance.

Wnuk continues, "...as Jessica [Folsom] mentioned earlier, we support the cosplayer's social channels, reposting their stuff and making sure that they get the shout-out that they definitely deserve. During the process of [creating] their cosplay, they take videos and in-progress [clips] which works really well on social, then once that's done we do photo shoots and then we use those on our social pages [and their own]."

It's important to the ESO team that they foster an organic and growing support structure between artists, cosplayers, and devs in a way that works for everyone. We're talking just before the Elder Scrolls Anniversary fan event kicks off in Amsterdam. It's hosting the team's "first cosplay contest ever," Folsom shares – something she and Wnuk have been eager to explore. With quite a turnout, the event was a great place for fandom creators across media to share their passion.

OF NEEDLE AND SWORD

Kelly Coffman, a character artist specialising in clothes and clothes creation at Zenimax Online Studios is a cosplayer herself. She's often working on several pieces in her spare time, and it certainly feels as though these days there's less of a hard line



1 Detailed concept designs, like this one for the Pyre Watch armour from ESO: Greymoor, can be useful for cosplayers. 2 Cosplay is a great way to celebrate what you love. (This is raimundcosplay as a Nord.) Sharing the craft brings communities and creators together.

Pictured: how you perceive the world while in full ESO cosplay (probably).

between fan creators and the teams making the games they love.

"I've been cosplaying for – I have to do the math – is that 18 years? Yeah, 18 years," Coffman laughs, showing us the costume she's working on. "My boss makes stuff as well, so like, we work in conjunction with our concept artists when we're coming up with designs. We do make a point to make things like material call outs specifically during the concept stage so that when we're going to the point of actually building the items for the game, we take that into consideration."

It's gratifying to know that all those hours zooming in on hi-res screenshots working out what what fabric an outfit is meant to be made out of aren't in vain. Just as cosplayers often want to be accurate, so too do designers when it comes to conceiving the costumes in the first place.

"That's one of our initial steps, when building outfits for our game," Coffman says. "To [realistically] simulate clothing [...] To try and get wrinkles and get our assets to look as close to what that cloth might look like. Like, chiffon has very fine wrinkles, or it might be a little heavier if it's like a linen or something like that."

Coffman talks about design in a similar way to a film or theatre costume designer; there's the same understanding of the craft even though she and her team work in a digital world where they could literally do anything.

While cosplay isn't at the forefront of their minds when they're designing, it's fair to say that their consideration of how these garments will work in the real world is massively helpful to fan creators. The art team have even brought in fan community costumers to look at the models to see where seams, zips, or fastenings might need to go in order for them to work as clothing, and if that isn't showing due consideration towards cosplayers, we don't know what is.

But that's not to say that realism gets in the way of design, nor does real-world practicality strike a line through something cool. That would be boring for the dev artists and cosplayers alike – after all, everyone loves a challenge.

"That's one of our initial steps, when building outfits for our game. To [realistically] simulate clothing."

"I think when it comes to our armour and stuff, we do tend to push the boundaries with [realism] because we obviously want our players to look really cool when they're in combat," Kelly Coffman explains. "Armour might not necessarily be as in tune with the real world, but we still take into account what kind of material the armour [is] built from, what would this metal be like? How would this leather look when it's worn?" Coffman adds that it's all still within

1

reason. "We do have certain restrictions with our models so we have to make sure things are sized correctly. We don't [have] those big shoulders like [you sometimes see] that are so unrealistic…" she laughs. "Like, how would [someone move and not] knock themselves out?"

Having come up against this limitation while making costumes myself, when a piece of armour doesn't quite want to move with the human body the way it should, I appreciate the commitment to some degree of practicality. But this raises a question: what does this look like from a cosplayer's perspective, from the point of view of one who's been involved in making costumes for these companies as well as designing for them?

Fan events aren't only about cosplay – treats like sweetrolls can also delight when brought outside the game.

PLAY IT AGAIN

Deez Lees is a freelance artist and designer who's also a cosplayer, like Coffman – however, when it comes to Bethesda, their roles are reversed.

> "When everybody understands 'Oh, I know what that character is, I love them', it translates across any language."

Lees has worked with companies on using cosplay as a pillar of the release cycle in its own right.

"I worked with Bioware as a cosplayer. We got the Nyreen stuff months before anyone had a hint of who Nyreen was. What was in that DLC [Mass Effect 3: Omega], you know – like, obviously, we had like a billion NDAs signed," says Lees. "That is a thing, getting cosplayers to appear as that character when those images drop or when those games get released. It's marketing."

And it works. It works even better when developers drop a load of resources alongside a cosplay photoshoot or video. Studios often put up character models in the week of release for cosplayers to get hold of, along with close-up reference images, behind-the-scenes details, and sometimes even tutorials from hired cosplayers to show other fans how to make a character's look all their own. But it wasn't always such plain sailing.

"[It was] sort of a Wild West period for quite a number of years. And there were some companies taking advantage of certain cosplayers, but there were also some companies trying to do the right thing and paying people [too,] so it just depended," Lees says. "But it's different now: companies know that they want to have a good reputation with their fans."

She reiterates what Coffman says about materials, an additional benefit of cosplayers being that they know what they're talking about when it comes to fabric, weathering, how a certain tarnish looks on a certain metal, and much more besides.

"I find this fascinating, the connection that people make in terms of the characters that they choose to cosplay as well," Lees says, speaking from the point of view of a designer as much as a cosplayer. "Because that's another fascinating thing, at least from the side of when you're developing a character, it's not just the look of the character, right? Yeah, they have to look cool, but if they have the personality of a wet mop, who's going to actually want to cosplay them? There's the design element of it, like the visual design, but then there's also just that character behind it, and is that going to resonate with people, and are they going to want to cosplay them? Right? Absolutely."

This brings us right back around to the joy of seeing creations brought to life by fans, just as Folsom talked about. So often when it comes to cosplay a lot of non-cosplayers, and even cosplayers sometimes, get lost in the looks, but in truth it all comes down to how fans react to a character. Those fan favourites come back again and again for a reason – not just because they look the coolest, but because they made people feel things.

The connection between games and the fan communities around them can be tricky to navigate, but when done right it can be rewarding for everyone. Seeing a cosplayer walking out onto the con floor dressed as a character that you never thought you'd see step out of the screen, let alone out of your own creative ideas, is a special experience. It's wonderful to see that being appreciated by big studios. The respectful way studios work with the passion of the fans to bring in new people, or to celebrate the community, strengthens those bonds as much as any contact adhesive or overlocked seam stitch.

"Cosplay is a very universal language," Folsom says. "We've seen artists from all around the world. They don't even need to speak the language that we speak; when everybody understands 'Oh, I know what that character is, I love them,' it translates across any language." ■

1 CaliaBlackstone won the Grand Prize at the ESO tenth anniversary fan event for this cosplay of Vaermina. 2 Mass Effect 3's Nyreen, the series' first female Turian character, was rather enigmatic before her introduction in the Omega DLC.

Booking it

Looking to dive deeper into the world of fandom? Holly's written the book on it – literally. A History Of Fans And Fandom takes you from the days of Shakespeare to the present on a journey to learn more about loving to love things. Find out more about it at: **hollyswinyard.com**

IMMORTALITY

Marissa Marcel, this is your life – or was it? We excavate the layers of Immortality, on and off camera.

Before saying anything about film or game making, before even asking Immortality's director Sam Barlow how he actually feels about the term 'interactive movie,' there's one question we find more pressing: what's a Half Mermaid anyway?

Barlow jokes, "Wow, that's our 45 minutes gone," before offering what he calls a "comprehensive short answer."

Barlow self-published 2015's Her Story on PC, but for his next game, Telling Lies (which debuted on PC in 2019 before coming to PS4 in 2020), he was told he needed to create a business entity to contain things – a production company, essentially. Tasked with creating a list of fairly unique names on a tight deadline, Barlow borrowed one of these from "a theoretical screenplay I have not written but would love to write."

Called 'Drowning A Mermaid,' the pitch sees master of suspense Alfred Hitchcock collaborating with a legendary blonde actress he never worked with in real life.

"Esther Williams is someone I'm obsessed with," Barlow says.

Both an accomplished actress and a competitive swimmer, Esther Williams was known as MGM's Million Dollar Mermaid, and starred in numerous aqua-musical roles throughout the '40s and '50s. In Barlow's film history fairy tale, Hitchcock "wants to create the world's most technologically advanced, clever drowning sequence" with Williams in the starring role. Alas, an influx of pictures about Hitchcock in recent years has led Barlow to put this idea on the back burner.

He laughs, explaining, "I was like, 'Argh! No-one's gonna want my

DIE TONIGHT, LIVE FOREVER

Sam Barlow talks fairy tales, film history, and building **Immortality** with Jess Kinghorn

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** OUT NOW / **PUB** HALF MERMAID PRODUCTIONS
DEV HALF MERMAID PRODUCTIONS / **PLAYERS** 1

SPOILER WARNING!

We're cracking this case wide open and diving deep into Immortality's story. Turn back now if you still haven't played it.

Hitchcock movie – I have to wait 20 years before I can do this again.'"

Nonetheless 'Drowning A Mermaid' still became the business entity that released Telling Lies, though it needed to be amended for Immortality. "Without me there to explain what 'Drowning A Mermaid' meant… Our brief amounts of research were like, 'This might be a scary name to people, and sound somewhat violent,'" Barlow tells us. Hence, the studio became 'Half Mermaid'… which still sounds a bit like the result of some offscreen violence to us.

Barlow, however, offers a different train of thought: "There was something appealing about the nonsense of 'What is half a mermaid?' Well, if you pick the human part, we're all half-mermaid!"

LOST IN SEA FOAM

It's a deep well to draw from. Just for starters, confines of category ('What is half a mermaid?') haunt projects that are playable but lean on live-action footage; we still can't quite escape distracting questions like 'Are they really games, though?'

"People kept calling these things 'interactive movies,'" Barlow says, reflecting on his earlier work, "and I was like, 'Yeah, they're not really, but okay. Let's do it. Let's do it. Let's make an interactive movie!'"

Barlow also tells us, "Immortality, in some ways, was me digging into [the 'Drowning A Mermaid'] idea of […] creating a fictional Hitchcock-type figure and the interplay between him and this actress that have different trajectories."

Immortality and the studio's namesake share many of the same

IMMORTALITY

1 Table reads, costume tests, and more mechanisms of pre-production are deployed as novel storytelling tools here. 2 When we asked for 'the house red,' this is *not* what we meant. Talk about suffering for your art... 3 Among its web of story, every clip tries to teach you just a little bit about the filmmaking process.

threads: a film history fairytale about supposedly lost flicks, a Hitchcockian director a little too keen to mould their actress's story, and, of course, death by a force of nature.

Fiery imagery is core to so much of Immortality's visual identity that it's easy to gloss over a clip from Two Of Everything, the final film of fictitious actress Marissa Marcel (played by the very real Manon Gage), where a staged drowning nearly becomes a real one.

"My 13-year-old pointed out – this isn't a huge spoiler – that every single game I've ever made involves watery death or strange, watery imagery," Barlow shares, "and they were like, 'What is it with you, Dad? Like, what? Did you, like, almost drown when you were young?'"

'Drowning' too is an apt metaphor for what *actually* happened to Marissa Marcel: she lost herself among the crashing waves of a vast, nigh-unknowable entity. But before we engage spoiler mode and speak about all of *that*, let's respool the reel a bit.

Marissa Marcel's casting in her first film, 1968 monksploitation-meets-noir flick Ambrosio, is inspired by actress Jean Seberg's early career. An unknown talent, Seberg was selected from thousands of hopefuls for the leading role in Otto Preminger's 1957 film Saint Joan. Her experience working with Preminger was fraught, and when the picture premiered, critics were merciless about her inexperienced performance. Though Seberg went on to star in landmark pictures such as 1960 French New Wave crime drama Breathless, her story ends tragically.

This rise and ruin is an all-too-familiar arc throughout cinema history – to say nothing of how Hitchcock infamously terrorised actress Tippi Hedren both on and off camera. Immortality arguably attempts to tell a different story, one about the transformation from artist's subject to author of one's own destiny.

REWRITING HISTORY

"The interesting thing with classic films noir is these are actually juicy roles for actresses," Barlow begins,

Game director Sam Barlow, who's agreed to share the secrets of Immortality with us.

"where they get to actually have sexual agency, they get to actually drive the plot, they get to win and they get to be bad and intelligent [...] But, to counter that, is the fact that the femme fatale is also still essentially a sexy trope for the benefit of the male audience. There's all this complexity baked into the femme fatale

"EVERY CLIP YOU CAN FIND HAS MULTIPLE USES AND MEANINGS AND WAYS OF CONNECTING."

characters [so we thought], 'Okay, that's interesting – let's echo that through [Marissa's] three movies.'"

After Ambrosio, 1970's Minsky is Marissa's attempt to make the femme fatale character "more real," through a plot that sees an artist's subject fight for ownership of her own story, often with bloody consequences in and around the frame. Half Mermaid "watched every erotic thriller going," as Barlow pitches the genre as "an evolution" of the noir films that came before. He goes on to argue that, "If the setup [of an erotic thriller] is like 'I'm attracted to and sleeping with this person that might be a killer,' [...] the ones that were more satisfying

were the ones where yes, that person was the killer."

Barlow likens designing Immortality to designing a metroidvania; you visit the same locations repeatedly, the space transformed and recontextualised each time you return with a new power-up. In Immortality's case, clips within clips, fiction within fiction, and dual roles within dual roles peel away the mystery.

"We gave ourselves the responsibility to make sure that every clip you can find has multiple uses and meanings and ways of connecting with other clips," Barlow says, "And then we'd get to the insert shots."

As Barlow avoids cleanly establishing master shots, you have to piece the story together through table reads, close-ups, and location scouting. This elucidates a bit of movie-making magic while also developing Marissa's own arc towards becoming a creative force in her own right. For one example, an insert shot from Minsky focusses on a hand stubbing out a cigarette.

"Often, when you do an insert shot on hands, it's not actually the principal actor because they're back getting their makeup done; you don't have them hanging around on set just so they can put their hand into shots," Barlow explains. "So often there is somebody else's hand just

A LIFE ON FILM

Every film fictitious actress Marissa Marcel worked on

01 Marissa's earliest on screen appearance is a 1968 black-and-white advertisement for soap promising to give you 'skin that never grows old.'

02 Later in 1968, Marissa is chosen from thousands of auditionees to play a young woman who disguises herself as a monk in Ambrosio. But nothing is as it appears, in the film or the studio.

03 The negatives of Ambrosio are stolen, and Marissa moves on to fresh projects with the director of photography John Durick. Their collaboration results in 1970's Minsky, a film about a cop investigating the murder of an artist and his relationship with the lead suspect – the artist's model. An accident on set results in the death of the leading man, and Marissa withdraws from public life.

04 Marissa returns, looking as though no time has passed, for another collaboration with John Durick in 1999's Two Of Everything. She plays the dual roles of a pop sensation and her secret body double. When the double suffers a watery death intended for the singer, the performer is left to investigate in a world that thinks she's dead. Behind the scenes, the production comes apart at the seams.

1

2

3

being used. I know that Rian Johnson did this on his Star Wars movies – all the inserts of Luke Skywalker's hand are *his* hand."

In Immortality, a voice off camera asks if that's how the film's male lead would stub out a cigarette. The prickly voice of fictitious director John Durick snaps, "It is now." If you don't already know what happened to Minsky's lead actor, you're immediately intrigued, and if you do, that's still only one layer of the mystery.

After a terrible accident on set kills her co-star, Marissa disappears from public life. She re-emerges to play a double role in 1999's Two Of Everything. Playing the lead roles of both a pop star and her body double, Marissa becomes both investigator and murder victim. In one pivotal clip, a staged drowning very nearly becomes a real one. Everything before this point has just been the flyleaf to all of Immortality's layers.

What binds it all together is genre. Screenwriter and film producer Allan Scott worked with Half Mermaid on the script for Minsky, sharing wisdom from frequent collaborator Nicolas Roeg. The perhaps best-known Scott and Roeg collaboration is 1973 thriller Don't Look Now, another layered picture that hinges on an inciting incident of watery death.

Barlow paraphrases, "The idea was, if you want to say something really deep and meaningful, you shouldn't go and make a deep and meaningful movie – won't work. You can use genre as a way of kind of injecting the deep meanings into the bloodstream, as a way of getting the audience in and exploring much deeper themes. But having the framework of it being a genre piece, actually, is more powerful."

Marissa's films' production woes underscore her arc to becoming an artist in her own right.

DARKER THAN BLACK

Noir stories are about more than detectives and dames, exploring all that lingers along the shadowy edges of morality. For another example of all the vehicle of genre fiction can achieve, take Anne Rice's Interview With The Vampire. Ostensibly genre fiction about charming bloodsuckers who, in every sense, simply will not die, the book draws heavily on conventions of literary fiction for its exploration of grief. First published in 1976 (yes, really), its appeal has endured for almost half a century.

You know exactly where this feature is going – it's time to talk about Immortality's shape-shifting, time-travelling vampires. Surprise! 'Marissa Marcel' left the building decades before a single frame of Ambrosio was shot, replaced by an entity that devoured her and now wears her face. Introduced to the player as The One and The Other, this undying pair are referred to as 'Proteans' in the script, and the word 'vampire' is tellingly never uttered.

"When we put out the original press kit [...] our little embargo thing was like, [...] 'Please don't use the V-word,'" Barlow tells us, "And we got

IMMORTALITY

1 Marissa's story is as much about what would've made it into the final edit as what's left on the cutting room floor. 2 Immortality draws heavily from real film history, taking inspiration from the life stories of a number of real-world actresses. 3 Bloody hell! Don't worry, we'll get into *all* of this when we engage spoiler mode. 4 Sex and death are never far from any one of Immortality's three fictitious flicks. Predictably, things get messy.

a couple of people being like, 'I don't want to sound stupid, and maybe I've missed something. But what is the V-word? Like, is it the Virgin Mary?' I was like, 'Okay, if the V-word isn't in your head, you're fine.'"

Dissatisfied with certain well-worn tropes, Immortality's is a deliberately less explicit take. Barlow quips, "If this character has been alive for 10,000 years, would they *really* be just a reskinned badass goth?"

"YOU CAN USE GENRE AS A WAY OF KIND OF INJECTING THE DEEP MEANINGS INTO THE BLOODSTREAM."

Vampires were always the unbeating heart of the project, and the bloodline goes back further than you may think. Barlow explains, "Part of the genesis of Immortality was the three years I spent making a Legacy Of Kain game that got cancelled."

Legacy Of Kain: Dead Sun began development at the same time the often-denigrated young adult Twilight book series was enjoying the peak of its popularity, so the team did a lot of research into how to take their vampires in a fresh direction. Years later, when it came time to move on from the real-world horror that had inspired Telling Lies, Barlow's research bubbled back up.

"This was in some of the Legacy Of Kain stuff as well – it was like the idea of immortality projects, the idea of 'Do we create art to have something that lives beyond us?'" Barlow says, "And so then, across the game, we were consciously coming up with different answers to the question of how do we deal with our mortality."

Barlow pored over Karen Blixen's short stories Echoes and The Dreamers, as well as The Vampire Tapestry by Suzy McKee Charnas, but it was an interview with a young Olivia Hussey from the BFI's archives that ignited the spark.

Promoting Franco Zeffirelli's film adaptation of Romeo And Juliet – infamous for its nude scenes with underage actors – there's a particular moment in the 1967 interview that stands out for Barlow:

"At some point the interviewer, who's very BBC, is like, 'Oh Olivia, I couldn't help but notice that you're smoking a cigarette. There can't be many 14-year-olds that smoke cigarettes,' or something. And she gives him this incredible look that is this kind of withering, 'Dude, you have no idea what fucking teenage girls get up to.'"

Barlow later goes on to elaborate, "Jean Seburg being cast by Otto Preminger, Olivia Hussey being cast by Zeffirelli – like you have these dudes wielding huge amounts of power, seeing these young women as putty [...] and just seeing this little spark of incredible badassery from Olivia Hussey – I think, just in my head, it was like, 'What if actually behind the eyes, she is an immortal vampire that can rip this guy's fucking throat out?' Like, that was this very simple wish-fulfilment thing of like, 'Oh, that would be an interesting layer!'"

Today, Olivia Hussey is an actress in her 70s. Over her decades-long career, she's been repeatedly asked about playing Juliet, and her experience of shooting nude scenes at such a young age. Her answer has evolved over the years, though in 2022 she and her co-star Leonard Whiting filed a lawsuit against Paramount Pictures, seeking damages on grounds including 'sexual abuse' and 'sexual harassment.' It may not be ripping someone's throat out, but it *is* something approximating justice in the real world, away from the immortal silver screen. ■

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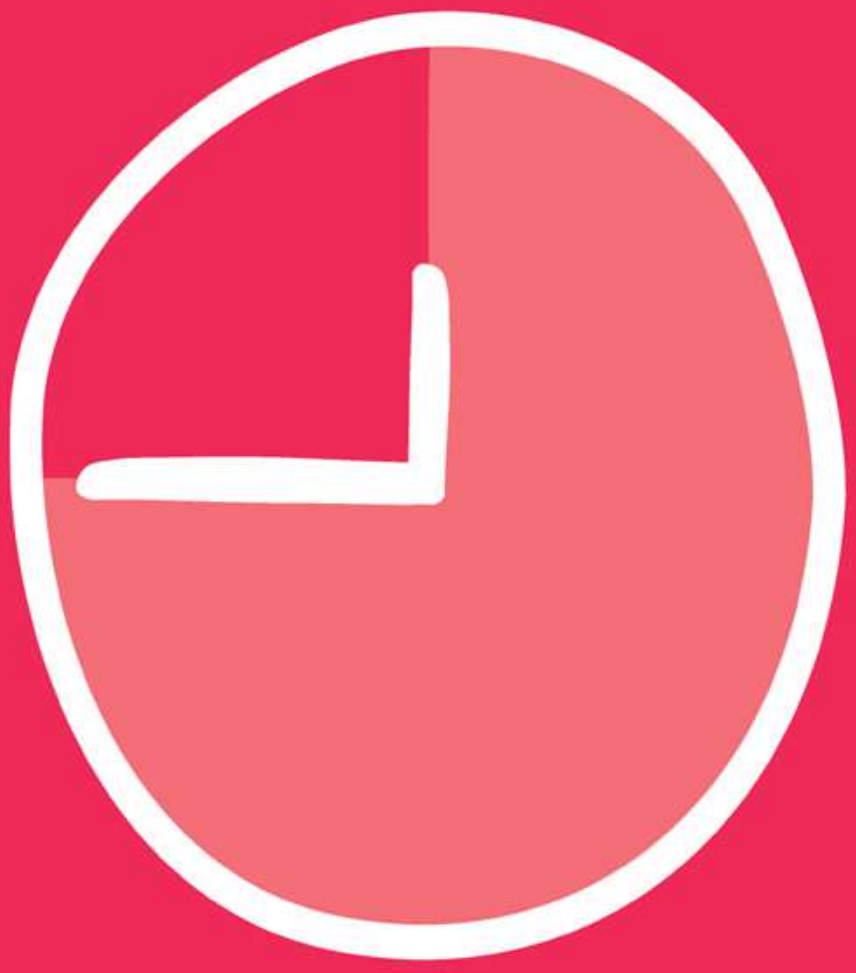

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Reviews

"A STORY OF A JOURNEY TRAVELLED."

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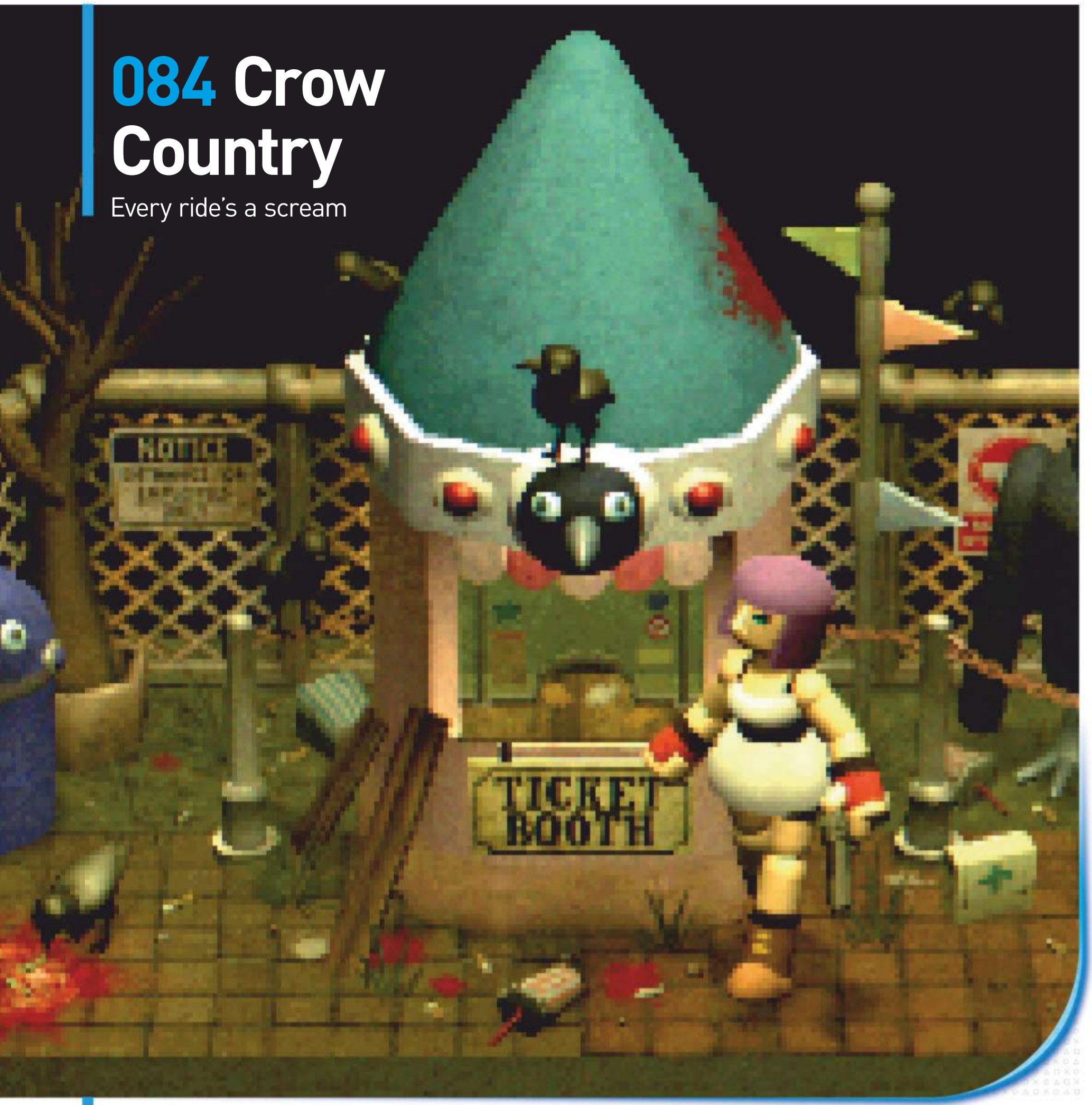
084 Crow Country

Every ride's a scream



HIGHLIGHTS

CROW COUNTRY 084 | SAGA: EMERALD BEYOND 088 | INDIKA 090 | ETERNAL THREADS 091 | SYSTEM SHOCK 092
MONSTER HUNTER STORIES 2: WINGS OF RUIN 094 | READ ONLY MEMORIES: NEURODIVER 096
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Crow Country

Dreadful theme park is worth visiting

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £15.49
ETA Out now
PUB SFB Games Limited
DEV SFB Games Limited
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 5 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable controls, and camera speed; clearer HUD

Ahhh PlayStation-1-era horror! Truly a golden age for 3D frights. We got our first visit to Silent Hill, several great Resident Evils… in fact, let's go and play some Resident Evil Director's Cut on PS Plus right now. *Plays it for ten minutes* Oh good *God*. What's with these horrendous controls? Why can't we skip the constant door-opening cutscenes? Why do the characters all look like Lego minifigs after botched plastic surgery? OG Resident Evil is a classic, undoubtedly, but to modern thumbs it's about as easy to pick-up-and-play as a saxophone full of spiders. We've seen a wave of PS1-inspired horror recently, but maybe some nightmares belong in the past.

Enter Crow Country, a love letter to classic horror games that's been designed without the rose-tinted glasses. It's about as smart and sophisticated an update of old-school survival horror as you could hope for, smartly fixing those earlier games' flaws while keeping their excellent sense of place – and their power to make you jump so hard that you make a most undignified noise and drop the controller (a hypothetical example, of course).

You're Mara Forest, a police officer searching for someone at a theme park called Crow Country. It's 1990 and Crow Country has been closed down for a couple of years. It would be a mean spoiler to say why but it's surprisingly *not* because building a theme park based around crows turned out to be a bad business decision. No, something much more sinister is going on here.

GHOST TRAIN

SFB Games' first achievement is Crow Country's incredible atmosphere. Making a horror game where all the characters are adorable Playmobil-style figures initially sounds about as good an idea as a crow-themed theme park. But the developer

Never mind the toy-like aesthetic, bloody gobbets will *always* be revolting.

Ranked solely on jump scares, it gets an A+.

1 When to aim for a stand-off, and when to scarper? We're not saying... 2 2106 is one of the game's most intriguing mysteries. It's not a door code, that's all we'll say. 3 Mara says this after accidentally decapitating a swan. Er, a fake one, just to be clear.

has crafted a horror setting for the ages. Whatever joy this theme park once contained has been buried under layers of grime and neglect. Anyone who screamed their way through Silent Hill 3 or Five Nights At Freddy's will know how great a setting a theme park can be for a horror game, and Crow Country absolutely nails the so-overly-happy-it's-actually-horrible vibe.

To give an example of the kind of 'attraction' you're in for, there's a pond full of rotating animatronic ducks. Except they move in jerky, broken, uncomfortable ways, on a bed of water so sickly green you feel like you could get ill just looking at it. The game's atmosphere is boosted further still by an incredible soundtrack whose influences are obvious – clearly the composer has visited Silent Hill – but is distinct enough to not just feel like a mere Akira Yamaoka impression.

You're free to rotate the camera (no fixed angles here), and it's a great way to interact with these nasty horror dioramas. Aim Mara's gun and the camera will suddenly snap behind her, and not always to a helpful angle. But eventually you get used to nudging the camera where you want it in combat. Besides, it's survival horror. Combat *should* feel clumsy and awkward. Crow Country isn't as harsh as its influences; there's an unlimited supply of handgun ammo in your car, as long as you can get back there alive. But it's still a game where running away is often the smarter choice.

Whatever joy this theme park once had has been buried under layers of grime and neglect.

MURDER MYSTERY

This is from the same developer as the brilliant detective game Tangle Tower, something felt here in the excellent writing and the way you gradually solve puzzles to unlock more of the park to explore. That's also how you progressed through early horror games, but this game has a couple of crucial differences: 1) no bloody limited inventory slots; and 2) clear, logical puzzle design that won't leave you screaming for the wrong reasons. The long-gone employees of the park have left notes everywhere with clues to where crucial items are located, brilliantly hidden under bitchy complaints about their coworkers (one memo moans about an item that's been taken without permission to fix the swan-boats: "you can't reason with swan-boat people").

The writing is consistently outstanding, telling a great story with plenty of dry wit that crucially never undermines the horror. Crafting a tale through chunks of exposition that have been left on the floor is a game design trope that predates the Big Bang. But in Crow Country it's done so effectively that it reminds you why it became a trope in the first place. Some of the writing is genuinely unnerving, often instilling a nasty sense of dread with just a couple of sentences. The tragedy of what happened here only deepens with each new revelation, making this an absorbing puzzle box to gradually piece together.

Of course, all this would be meaningless if Crow Country weren't scary. Ranked solely on jump scares, it gets an A+. The

4

5

4 Mara's commentary is delightful. The game rewards investigating everything. 5 Stuck? You can get ten hints, a clever update of OG Resident Evil's limited save slots. 6 Personally, we're more worried about the ghost by that blood stain.

6

developers love bursting open vents, Dead-Space-style, to throw something ghastly at you, though this game is far more restrained than that one was, and you're generally lulled into a false sense of security so that you won't see most of the 'BOO!' moments coming.

BLOODY DISGUSTING

As for the monsters themselves, despite the toy-like looks, grisly body horror takes precedence over psychological frights. Their groans and barks sound more pained than malicious, and their bizarre, stilted movements often make them feel more like animatronic park mascots gone wrong than sentient beings. Some of the gooier, bloodier members of the bestiary are genuinely revolting things to fire panicked gunshots into.

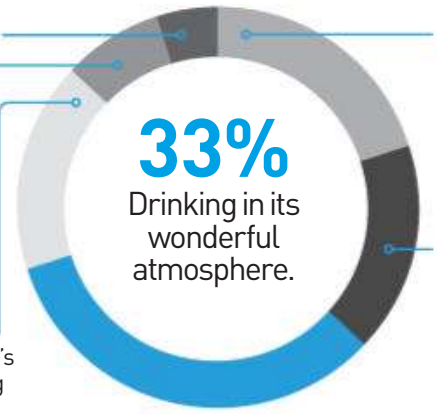
But this is the only place Crow Country comes up short, its charming Playmobil aesthetic possibly preventing it from attaining a place in the horror big leagues. Silent Hill 2 has Pyramid Head, Resident Evil 2 has its lickers, RE2 Remake has Mr X stalking you down its corridors, and Resident Evil Village had the *thing* in House Beneviento. Crow Country is consistently tense but doesn't have a monster or set-piece to compare with those. This is by no means a critical flaw and we'd still confidently recommend this game to any horror fan, but it really feels like it is just one true nightmare away from being worthy of a seat at the King's table. That Crow Country even comes close is a remarkable achievement for an excellent horror debut.

An outstanding homage to PS1 horror that's no mere tribute act. If this is just the start of an excellent new series, then consider our return ticket already booked. Abbie Stone

8 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: CROW COUNTRY



5% Panicking as you run out of ammo. Quick, run to the car!

8% Ewwwwing at the grosser monsters. It's almost a relief the graphics are so cutesy.

17% Laughing at the witty writing. It's well worth seeking out every note.

20% Squealing as something horrible makes you jump. How does it get us EVERY time?!

17% Whimpering at the creepy, unsettling writing. Maybe we'll play with the lights on...

HOW TO... RUN FASTER

In last issue's Planet Of Lana review we banged on about how much we hate controlling slowpokes in games, and Mara's not exactly light on her feet. Fortunately, there are running shoes in the trunk of this car parked by yours. Once you have the silver key, go and put 'em on!

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

EDWARD CROW
The owner of the derelict theme park, who often calls you for creepy chats.

TOLMAN
A park employee whose ultimate allegiances are worryingly unclear.

HARRISON
A police officer who came by bike because someone slashed his car tyres. (It was you.)

LOVING/HATING

COR-VID
Some of the clues you discover are wonderfully dumb. Kudos to whoever took the time to colour in this handy 'diagram'.

COUNTRY PURSUITS
This *thing* crawled out of your nightmares and straight into Crow Country's code. There aren't enough bullets in the world.

IS IT BETTER THAN?

YES
When it comes to horror updates, Crow Country is far more successful than Alone In The Dark.

NO
The beautiful remake of Resident Evil is the best old-school survival horror on PlayStation.

YES
It's a classic, but we'd sooner smooch a licker than endure playing Resident Evil Director's Cut today.

SaGa: Emerald Beyond

A jewel in battle, a candy ring in the prattle

Green all over, but certainly not behind the ears, '80s RPG series SaGa has returned with its strange 'free scenario' system intact. Yet while some of its defining oddities remain and function better than ever at ensuring your quest feels like your own, compromises in presentation and scope make this series entry more 'emerald in the rough' than 'glittering jewel'.

Early on, a helpful scarecrow with a painted-on face guides us through a desert world, which we decide to explore. We convince him to join us, and by the end of the game he's a gun-toting, samurai-sword-wielding powerhouse who helps us destroy a god (it's that kind of RPG). Lining up a shot to deliver the final hit in the tricky encounter, he cocks his head right before pulling the trigger, his blank, empty-headed expression giving the animation a particular menance.

We grow quite attached to Scarecrow and the rest of our assembled cohort. When we meet them is purely dependent on our choice of which world to explore next in this multiversal adventure. The way their stats grow as we quest is based on the knocks they take and the enemies they take down, and the skills they can use based on innovations they uncover by attacking with specific weapons.

With no discrete levels to speak of, the stats and abilities of each of the tens of possible heroes tell a story of a journey travelled rather than of grinding – especially as only tricky battles and hard-fought victories improve them by much.

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £39.99
ETA Out now
PUB Square Enix
DEV Square Enix
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 6-25 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY All dialogue has text

NEW BRANCH

And, with one story done, it's time to take on another. Six starting characters (though five routes, as police detectives Bonnie and Formina buddy-cop it up by travelling together) have their own threads to follow, each with a simple premise to get them journeying between worlds. The Dismal King, Siugnas, the only remaining vampire, seeks thralls to reclaim his throne, for example, whereas witch-in-training Ameya Aisling has to find cats in order to restore her stolen magical power.

These setups also nudge you in directions of play, though the combat system is so customisable you can engineer any tactics you prefer. Naturally, Ameya is all about spellcasting, and your strategy needs to be to protect her with magical cat familiar Lolo and her squire Kato as she charges attacks. Siugnas, meanwhile, can bestow the ability to use powerful vampiric skills upon his thralls – at the cost of their own life points.

With your five-person party always entering battles at full health, and a notable lack of healing items, battles play out like delightful chess puzzles. A timeline at the bottom of the screen doesn't only display turn order, but indicates combo regions (via green plates) for you

The combat system is sublime, and will keep you coming back for round after round by itself.

Her consciousness has been taken from her—but such party tricks are nothing when set against my charm. Madam, look into my eyes!

1 Combo attacks humorously smash words together, from this to the snappier BiPain. **2** Conditionals like Pursuit can break enemy combos and add bonuses to yours. **3** The unflappable Siugnas is a constant delight.

and enemies; at the same time battle points – a shared pool you spend each turn on performing moves – slowly increases based on the formation you're using (such as when you defeat enemies, execute a combo, or just by turn progression).

Conditional skills can move pieces around while the turn is actually in action, and delaying or killing foes can capture new combo ground, granting damage bonuses which can then trigger additional hits. It's satisfying, and the hardest fights are taxing while remaining tantalising.

LOOSE THREADS

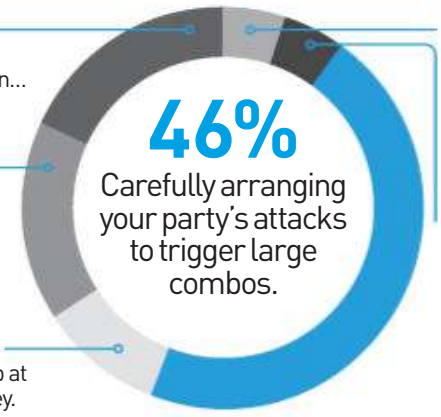
It's a sublime combat system that'll keep you coming back for round after round by itself. And good thing too, as otherwise Emerald Beyond can feel lightweight. The branching paths bear little narrative weight other than sometimes extending your journey (you may hit credits after a few hours or over 20). Revisiting worlds as different heroes offers little real variation, making repeated playthroughs dull rather than revealing. And the game looks downright ugly thanks to a perplexing filter effect on character models – a shame given the gorgeous key art. (The low-poly models in 2019's SaGa: Scarlet Grace remaster look better.) Between fights, clunky menus drag down management activities such as upgrading gear, perhaps due to the phone version launching simultaneously. Emerald Beyond shines in its unique battles that spotlight heroes you befriend, but elsewise feels low-budget.

A spectacular battle system that adapts to heroes you meet on your journey is trapped in a package that hasn't been polished enough to make it shine. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

7 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: SAGA: EB



18% Trying to decide between a sword or a handgun... Settling on both.

16% Spending too much time sluggishly navigating trade menus.

10% Considering which world to stop at next on your journey.

5% Wondering what this story will be like as another character...

5% ...Realising it's not much different. If we have to unfreeze those people once more...

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

BOH
A puppet kugutsu, his abilities are limited at first, but he picks up new tricks from pals.

MINSTREL
A robot wanting to spin an epic poem, they're looking for truly mythic battle wins.

DOLORES
Ready to serve whoever pops out of the coffins she waits in front of. Including *you*!

HOW TO... GET BETTER GEAR

Finding new equipment is rare, even when using the (clunky, but useful) item trading system. Instead, you have to enhance gear yourself using hoarded resources. Story milestones give you new concepts, which unlock additional recipes giving you branching options for reforging.

SECOND OPINION KITTY COLLECTOR

A magical girl studying for her exams by collecting cats, a mechanical songstress searching the worlds for her stolen heart, the last vampire fighting to reclaim his throne – though the story is a light touch, what's here is extremely my thing. The offbeat combat system keeps me coming back, even as the crusty filter over it all seems determined to send me looking for adventure elsewhere. **Jess Kinghorn**

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Expand your retinue for the first time. More will come, but you only get this for the first.

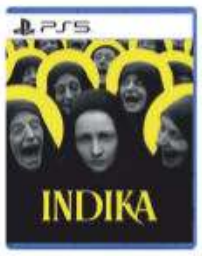
SILVER
Performing 100 United Attacks will net you this, a small fraction of your total.

SILVER
Visit ten (of a grand total of 17) worlds in the multiverse – where to next?

Fresh hell: bleeding style, this adventure game is the furthest thing from a stuffy service.

Indika

Better the devil you know? Not always



INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £19.99
ETA Out now
PUB 11 Bit studios
DEV Odd Meter
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 4+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Basic subtitles (text does not always exactly match dialogue); two fonts; adjustable subtitle size, controller sensitivity, and field of view; independently invertable X and Y axis; motion blur on/off; nudity filter; level selection after first completion

Should someone ask me about my own relationship to religious faith, I usually answer, "Me and the big cheese upstairs don't talk." God does not speak to put-upon nun Indika either – instead, something devilish bends her ear, and it's up to you whether she listens to it.

From surface-level story elements and imagery to all the old chestnuts about organised religion you've heard a million times before, Christianity permeates games, but few titles spar directly with its influence. Indika, on the other hand, explores faith through its own mechanics. The titular nun makes an unorthodox pilgrimage through an offbeat vision of 19th-century Russia. Snow-capped landscapes are torn apart by conflict and shoved back together again by steam-powered industrial structures that loom over this odyssey's cast, and it's no accident either that expressing faith here often resembles industrial toil – or the fact that at one point you can pray to a portrait of Karl Marx.

Many of the game's stark vistas wouldn't be out of place within late-20th-century arthouse cinema, but they're all punctuated by undoubtedly modern direction. Between side-scrolling platforming flashbacks, a contrapuntal chiptune soundtrack, and prayer at the press of a button, Indika is a unique beast well worth communing with.

LET US PRAY

The dialogue between Indika and the devil on her shoulder draws you in deep, in no small part thanks to a fantastic, suitably withering performance by actor Silas Carson. Unique puzzle mechanics make your descent a literal one too, as select levels are warped either by Indika's attempts to pray for peace of mind or her decision to let the villainous voice in. To move forward you must juggle both, intermittently sticking your fingers in your ears and telling the devil 'La la la, I can't hear you!'

There's the usual cavalcade of technical wobbles common to smaller releases, including a faltering framerate when Odd Meter *really* wants you to drink in those massive mechanical tableaus. However, the core creative vision is so confident it more than makes up for those rough edges, and even as the action becomes overly reliant on block pushing puzzles, we dare not tear our eyes away.

Often the point of the exercise is to move forward despite the devil monologuing in your ear, though that's not to say this playable exploration of faith offers a positive impression of religion. Indeed, those of faith will most likely find the ending refrain cynical, but allow us to play devil's advocate: while the final reveal is absurdist, sure, we find ourselves feeling oddly hopeful about what humans can achieve under their own steam.

"The dialogue between Indika and the devil on her shoulder draws you in deep."

This four-hour foray into faith is unlike anything else you'll play this year. Both incredibly bleak and beautiful, put your hands together for Indika. **Jess Kinghorn**

7 PLAY

If you've viewed a scene before, you can skip straight to the crucial decision point.

Eternal Threads

It's that time again (and again, and again), pal

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £15.99
ETA Out now
PUB Secret Mode
DEV Cosmonaut Studios
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 6 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable master volume, voice or sound volume, gamma, and look sensitivity; mute, subtitles, invert look, and vibration on/off; be aware the game contains very strong strobing lights

Despite time travel being central to this game's plot *and* action, the adventure takes place entirely in one house. And that's *great*. You want a game that does something different? This is your stop, off you get, remember to thank the bus driver on your way past. Six housemates died in a fire in 2015, but this wasn't supposed to happen, so you go back in time to prevent the tragedy.

The fire still has to happen (for some timey-wimey reason), so your job is to manipulate the thoughts and actions of the victims in the week leading up to the event in order to ensure they survive it. At a fundamental level, this means making sure they're awake and/or not in an artificially deep sleep on the fateful night – which isn't nearly as simple as it sounds. The butterfly effect is fluttering its wings particularly strongly here.

You arrive shortly after the fire has been put out and the bodies have been removed. With the help of some futuristic tech, you can bounce around the timeline of the previous week while viewing past events as holograms. Crucially, certain events allow you to choose which one of two timelines is 'real', thus influencing future events and opening up new scenes to view (and sometimes blocking off others).

THREADDY KRUEGER

It's therefore important that you care about the people whose lives you're playing with. The writing is generally strong throughout, with multiple examples of sparkling dialogue. The quality of the acting varies wildly, but on balance, each character quickly springs to life. Flirty uni student Raquel, her best friend Jenny (who's married to doctor Ben), siblings Neil and Linda, and landlord Tom all feel real enough to be worthy of saving.

The timeline must have been a nightmare to design, but the end result is easy to navigate, including some helpful filters to make finding specific characters simple. If you need to find a key to a locked room, or you're determinedly trying to work out how to save a specific housemate from a horrifying fiery fate, locating unseen events – or previous ones for which you want to try the alternate decision – is quick and easy.

Theoretically, the point at which the game ends is up to you. You're welcome to walk away having saved only a few of the six housemates (you monster). The issue is that if you *do* want to save everyone, the immersion is broken for the final hour or so as you concentrate on the timeline, rather than the events that it allows access to. This, in combination with the fact that putting a wall between people being *happy* and people being *alive* isn't explored as deeply as it could have been, slightly holds back an otherwise compelling experience.

The quality of the acting varies wildly, but on balance, each character quickly springs to life.

Who knew a house in the north of England could make a great setting for science fiction? A smart twist on time travel that shines despite room for improvement. **Luke Kemp**

7 PLAY

The laser rapier is one of the best weapons in the game. An essential pickup!

System Shock

A faithful remake of a classic – for better and for worse

The greatest mystery surrounding the space station this remake of a classic game takes place on isn't the origin of the malicious, super-advanced AI SHODAN. Nor is it why there are so few toilets for so many people. What we *really* want to know is how any work got done when people spent so much time recording ten-second messages on disposable audio recorders. These things are *everywhere*.

Poking fun at audio logs isn't new, we know, but it's worth lingering on the overwhelming amount of in-game media, as it feeds directly into what you end up spending your time doing. Don't be fooled by the "A first-person fight to the death in the depths of space!" tagline. There's plenty of combat, yet that isn't the focus.

A significant amount of your time is spent exploring, and working out what to do next. This is perfectly in keeping with your character, a hacker who finds themself in a huge, unfamiliar space station that they need to escape. Codes need to be found or worked out; the locations of vital equipment uncovered; new routes opened up. The way this is handled is something you will love or hate. Not only does System Shock refuse to hold your hand, it slaps your hand away with a cheese grater if you hold it out. If you don't pay close attention to those messages and audio logs, your chances of getting through to the end of the game are close to zero. There's a lot of working things out by yourself (or alternatively, regularly checking guides online).

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £34.99
ETA Out now
PUB Prime Matter
DEV Nightdive Studios
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 20-30 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Auto-rotate minimap, tutorials, auto reload weapons, vibration, motion blur, and subtitles on/off; invert Y axis; toggles for ADS and crouch; adjustable brightness, FOV, look sensitivity, individual audio element volume, and headbob amount; selection of HUD colour schemes

AI AI... OH

There's still plenty of room for improvement in this remake – especially on PS5. Issues such as some text being difficult to read, and some inventory and puzzles being awkward to navigate, betray the game's PC origins. There also seems to be some fear on the developer's part of angering System Shock purists, the clearest example of which is a code that's vital late in the game. The digits that make it up are spread across multiple floors of the space station, and the game refuses to record these for you or even mark the rooms that they're in once you've found them.

However, when System Shock *is* firing on all cylinders, it's fantastic. Slowly filling out the map as you explore a new area, cautiously creeping around each corner while listening for enemies that can take you out in seconds if you're sloppy, is a tense, gripping experience. During such sections of play, it's exactly the sort of game that grabs you for a few hours when you only intended to sit down for 20 minutes or so.

Unfortunately, these highs are always followed by extended lows, usually consisting of long stretches where you do laps of the station looking for something you need in order to progress. The compulsory

There seems to be some fear on the developer's part of angering System Shock purists.

1 This severed pair of legs had a chocolate bar in the pocket. We ate it. **2** If you enjoyed the puzzles in Bioshock, you'll love these. If not... good luck to you. **3** The cyberspace sections sit awkwardly out of place, and aren't much fun.

cyberspace sections (essentially zero-G shooting) are awful, too, tedious slogs that have always been unpopular with the fanbase. They're still bad, but now they're much prettier.

SPACE YOURSELF

The station is a relentlessly hostile place, and there's nothing wrong with that. It makes scraping through fights with just a fraction of health all the more satisfying, and each discovery, whether it's gear or a weapon that makes things that little bit more manageable, feels like a small but significant triumph. Every puzzle solution is a reward well-earned, each enemy outsmarted a victory to be celebrated. There are irradiated areas, but you can use detox patches or find a radiation suit to get past these. Death can come quickly, but there are (usually) unlockable respawn rooms. There is balance.

Your enjoyment will largely hinge on whether you consider the limited attempts to make the experience more accessible than it was 30 years ago frustratingly inadequate or immersively true to the original. A good example of the design philosophy adopted here is that before starting a game, you can individually tweak the difficulty of combat, cyberspace, missions, and puzzles – but if after a number of hours you find things too easy or too hard, you have to start the entire game over, abandoning all your progress, in order to change any of those options. As we say, you'll love it or hate it.

A gaming pill best swallowed with a heaped spoonful of nostalgia, this is good but not great. In space, no-one can hear you scream 'Where do I go now?' **Luke Kemp**

6 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: SYSTEM SHOCK

15% Taking out a cyborg or mutant, and feeling good doing it.

18% Having a great time exploring a new area, wondering how long it'll last.

10% Wandering around in circles like a lost and angry tourist *again*.

12% Trying to power through a puzzle with equal parts determination and despair.

6% Dying in an ambush, cursing yourself for not saving more recently.

STATPACK

09
Floors, plus the reactor. No single elevator connects them all, which makes moving between them one more obstacle to effective navigation.

01
Enemy that we hate above all others – what appears to be a kamikaze robot vacuum cleaner that zooms towards us and explodes. ARGH!

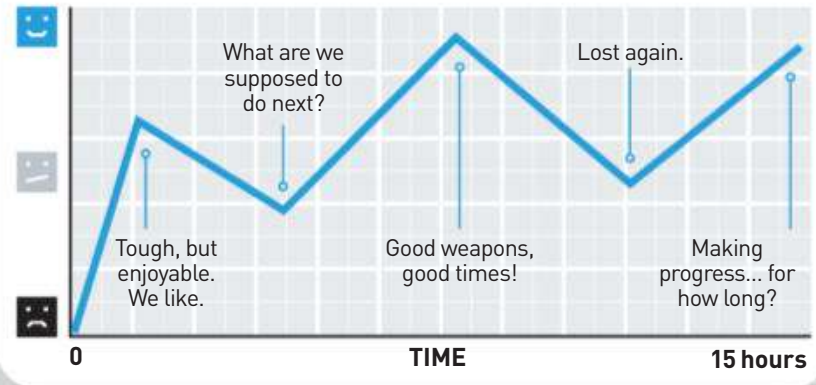
'94
The year the original was released. It was ahead of its time, and much of the design remains intact in this remake (for better and for worse).

LOVING/HATING

TWISTED SYSTEM
The atmosphere, while it holds, creates a powerful mix of unease and the temptation to slowly uncover the station's secrets.

SHOCKING BEHAVIOUR
Finicky inventory management and map navigation, and the obfuscation of objectives, work slightly too hard against you.

COMPEL-O-GRAPH



TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Destroy the CPU nodes in Medical. Take note; you'll need to identify and destroy more.

SILVER
Find every firearm in the game. It's easy to miss a few, so look around carefully.

GOLD
The only gold trophy is awarded for defeating SHODAN and completing the game.

The level of your Kinship Stone increases during the story, allowing you to forge kinship with even more powerful monsties.

Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings Of Ruin

Does the action-based series soar as a monster-friendly RPG?

Are you in the 'Think of the poor monsters' camp when it comes to Capcom's does-what-it-says-on-the-tin series? Then this may be just the spinoff for you. Quite a bit of the formula from the mainline series has carried over here, along with beasties that debuted in 2018's World, but it's all presented in a considerably more monster-friendly package.

You play as a rider whose village exists alongside, and has a kinship with, monsters (or 'monsties', to give the eyeroll-inducing portmanteau the game insists on using). The rest of the world doesn't see them in as kind a light, though. That outside opinion isn't helped by a mass disappearance of Rathalos that coincides with sightings of dangerous 'rage-rayed' monsters with pink glowing eyes, reinforcing the hunters' beliefs that a monster's only good for wearing or forging into a weapon. And so you're on a quest to uncover the truth of what's going on, and whether the Rathalos you become entrusted with is really the source of it all.

This RPG's 30-plus-hour adventure sees you journeying from Mahana Village to new lands, such as the snow-covered mountains of Loloska and the breathtaking Pomore Garden where it's cherry blossom season all year round. You'll also spot monsters in the field – some are harmless vegetarians, but most are wild and hostile and initiate turn-based battles on contact.

INFO

FORMAT PS4
PRICE £32.99
ETA Out now
PUB Capcom
DEV Capcom, Marvelous
PLAYERS 1-4
LENGTH 30+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Dual language options; some button remapping

NO SMALL PLAYERS

Battles usually pit you against monsters, though on rare occasions other human characters back up their own monsties. Combat follows a triangle system: speed beats power, power beats technical, and technical beats speed. It's straightforward, though the trick is to bring out a monstie who's likely to use the attack type you're after, with successful attacks building up a kinship gauge that lets you select their specific attacks or even ride them to unlock special moves.

There's strategy beyond the attack triangle too, as you can target a specific part of a monster to weaken first, such as breaking a Rathian's tail so that it can't hit you with its poison attack. Additionally, you're encouraged to switch weapons as monsters can be weak or resistant to sharp, blunt, or piercing weapons. This gives your rider a bigger role to play in every fight, as otherwise their attacks pale in comparison to what your monstie can dish out.

Though you technically level up with XP after each clash, the real way to improve your rider's stats is to buy or forge better kit, in true Monster Hunter style. So yes, despite what we said earlier about peaceful co-existence, riders still have to get their

1 You can try poaching a different egg from the same nest – just don't dally! **2** While you usually have a buddy in battle, there are also 1v1 duels. **3** Mixing up the turn-based battles are occasional confrontations settled with QTEs.

weapons and armour from *somewhere*. Slightly out of your control, however, is your human battle buddy, who grows and changes depending on where you are in the story. They and their monstie fight alongside you but without your input. It's a doubled-edge sword because while they are helpful, they might not adopt the strategy you want, and if they fall three times in battle, you're sent back to the last village too.

EGGING ON

If you're used to hunting monsters, Stories' turn-based approach isn't quite as exciting, even with options to change battle speed and some occasional QTE gimmicks thrown in. All of that aside, the real pacing issue stems from the amount of backtracking involved, with you having to run between each area and the village hub. It may only be following the typical loop of a mainline game, but because you're physically travelling back and forth (including every time you retrieve an egg from a randomly appearing monster den, as these can only be hatched at the village) it's much more pronounced.

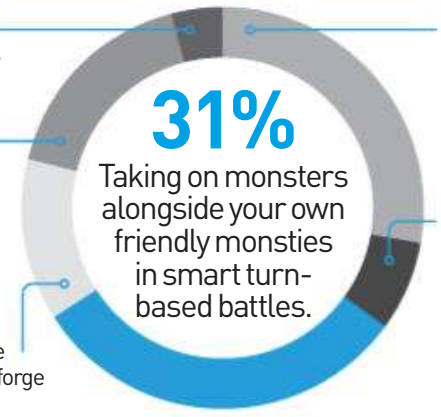
That said, there is a pretty deep and tactical game here that's arguably on par with its monster-slaying siblings. The family resemblance is strong; with tough 'royal' monsters sleeping in the field, daring you to wake them, all manner of skills to channel into your perfect monstie, and a meaty post-game, it's still pretty much Monster Hunter.

It may feel like a weak alternative to a genuinely new action-based Monster Hunter game, but Wings Of Ruin still stands on its own merits as an RPG. **Alan Wen**

7 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: MHS2: WOR



4% Wishing you could pet monsties outside battle.

17% Poaching eggs from a monster den, hoping you'll hatch something new.

13% Making a note of parts needed to forge gear at the smithy.

28% Exploring large and varied maps across the world, preferably while riding your monstie.

7% Enjoying handsomely crafted in-engine story cutscenes like you're watching an anime.

HOW TO... USE RITE OF CHANNELING

Rite Of Channeling lets your favourite monsties inherit genes from the ones you're not using. Each monstie has nine gene slots, which can be active or passive skills. Rainbow-coloured genes are the rarest, and transferring genes between different beasts is also possible.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

KAYNA
A free-spirited rider also from Mahana Village. Your first battle buddy.

ENA
A mysterious Wyverian girl who entrusts you with a Rathalos egg.

TSUKINO
A felyne who serves as a palico for hunter Kyle. As she's a spy, can you trust her?

LOVING/HATING

FASHION RIDER
As in the mainline series, there's plenty of monster gear you can craft to improve your stats while also dressing up your appearance.

GET CARTED
Even with fast travel that references being carted, there's still more boring backtracking going on than we'd like.

IS IT BETTER THAN?

As far as belated Monster Hunter ports go, Rise is a series high point – literally, thanks to Wirebugs.

Stories may have started the RPG sub-series, but this sequel surpasses it in every way.

Creature-collecting RPG Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch has the charm of Studio Ghibli on its side.

TOMCAT
Now brace yourself, it turns out my snooping around MINERVA paid off. ES88 is not just an agent at MINERVA, she's an esper!

Neurodiver is at its best when the developer revels in its love for terribly nerdy anime references.

Read Only Memories: Neurodiver

More of a brisk neuroswim

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £17.99
ETA Out now
PUB Chorus Worldwide
DEV Midboss
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 3-4 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY N/A

Released in 2018, 2064: Read Only Memories was a cyberpunk visual novel with point-and-click elements in which you solved a kidnapping with the help of the world's first sentient robot. While also set in a near-future California, Neurodiver doesn't have anything to do with it other than a few returning characters and a cyberpunk-y premise. This time, we're going to, ahem, read some actual memories using a… mind-reading kraken?

Luna, code name ES88, is an Esper, able to read and change memories. With the help of the kraken-like neurodiver and former combat android GATE, she can enhance her abilities to repair memories. This makes for a curiously uneventful life, until one day she encounters Golden Butterfly, an entity hiding in and corrupting people's memories.

It's not really Luna's job to fight Golden – just like the previous game, Neurodiver is a story about a painfully normal person somehow getting caught up in what can only vaguely be described as a criminal case within a criminal case. You solve a few unconnected cases by exploring memories, and collect memory fragments that you can slot into a menu to clear up corruptions Golden has created. In the few instances where guesswork is required to know what memory fragment you need, you can still solve these short puzzles by trial and error.

Neurodiver lacks the point-and-click gameplay of its precursor – now, all you need to do is click on something and Luna will automatically react in the right way. You also don't need to use things from your inventory any more. Talk to everyone and look at everything, and you'll find what you need.

FORGET IT

The idea of people forgetting things that are important to them, which underpins Neurodiver, would've worked without a villain. So, after hours of telling us how evil Golden is, instead of showing any actual evildoing the story resolves in a hasty infodump that leaves you with more questions than answers and feels incredibly unearned. This is especially unfortunate because Luna and her friends are visually striking, immediately grow on you, and are interesting to be around – from what little backstory we get, anyway.

Neurodiver is just as loaded with anime and game references as its predecessor. It's a nice idea to offer more backstory on old companions from 2064, but even here developer Midboss could have done a little more – it's cool to talk shop with the likes of TOMCAT again, but the favourites feel like random additions to a story they have nothing to do with. We like 'shorter games with worse graphics', but Neurodiver runs out of time before it can do anything meaningful with them.

It's not often that games are genuinely too short, but Neurodiver is over before any of its ideas or characters can develop, making it oddly dissatisfying. **Malindy Hetfeld**

5 PLAY

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 (reviewed), PS4 **PRICE** £4.99 **ETA** Out now
PUB Shinyuden **DEV** Ratalaika Games **LENGTH** 1 hr **PLAYERS** 1-2

Cyber Citizen Shockman 3: The Princess From Another World

Discover a vintage Japanese oddity

Aside from some questionably yonic imagery and the unfortunately-named 'Legendary power of Gash' that you're trying to stave off, this is wholesome platforming. The Kaiz Chjin Shubibinman series was released only in Japan on PC Engine in 1992, but now all three games have been ported to PS4 and PS5, with this third entry probably the most palatable to today's players.

Nonetheless, it does feel like an also-ran. It's graphically assured, piling on the parallax scrolling and using co-ordinated sprites to create complex movement in its many boss battles. It feels like its original designers gave up trying to copy Mega Man, instead favouring swords over shooting, though the swordplay is of the most basic 'push button to swipe with sword' variety. Weirdly, the first level plays almost exactly like an old Turtles game called Fall Of The Foot Clan, though quite why anyone would want to nod to that is a mystery.

The overpowered charge shot sees off some bosses in just two hits, and with emulation tools allowing for rewinds as well as save states you'll be done in half an evening. In fact, it's so short that subsequent playthroughs could last just half an hour each. That sounds rubbish, but it is actually quite cathartic to boss your way through it.

One sweet feature is the fan art section – seeing the work of 1991's 12-year-olds is rather lovely. The game's own enemy design is certainly visually imaginative, and the manga-styled cutscene illustrations are decently presented. Some of the boss fights, too, must have been spectacular back in 1992. Today, however, it's all very familiar.

Like its predecessors it has a same-screen, local co-op mode, which is modestly enjoyable. However, given the past 30 years of greater efforts, the best we can really say of this PlayStation incarnation is that it delivers a steady stream of trophies to your profile. Capable enough, but shallow, short, and forgettable.

An interesting curio from Japan that's too short and shallow to carry any real weight today, though it hasn't aged at all badly considering it's from 1992. Justin Towell

5 PLAY

THREE TO PLAY

PSN games you might have missed

Every month, loads of games come to the PS Store. You'd be hard-pressed to play them all, so we're looking at some that didn't quite make the cut for an in-depth review. This month we're gaining a fresh perspective, realising a new vision, and taking a peek overleaf.

First up, Digital Eclipse has resurrected another classic. **Wizardry: Proving Grounds Of The Mad Overlord** is a full 3D remake of the game of the same name – which was released in 1980. Maybe that's before your time, dear youthful reader (it certainly is for about half of Team PLAY), but it cannot be overstated just how influential that original release of this D&D-inspired dungeon crawling RPG was and continues to be. Granted, many, *many* titles have since come and gone to perfect the mechanical formula, but we say it's hard to see where a genre is going if you don't sometimes look back at where it's been. While this is definitely one for the history buffs, these crunchy mechanics of yore may just reveal hidden depths for devout dungeon delvers.

Speaking of having one for the road – that 'one' being a leaf out of someone else's book – next up is **Paper Trail** from Norwich-based developer Newfangled Games. This top-down puzzler presents a scene and then invites you to reimagine the space through the most sinful of acts: dog-earing the page. By folding over these virtual picture book pages to reshape what's visible, you can pick a path forward. And you'll want to see more of the gorgeous environments, with their appealing watercolour quality. That said, it can be hard to wrap your head around Paper Trails' internal puzzle logic, and you may well find yourself closing the book on this adventure long before its many folds reveal its full beauty.

Lastly, you'll catch us again on the flipside as a little ghost in **Hauntii**. It's set in a gorgeous, two-tone, cross-hatched world, and puzzles introduce a unique shade through possession mechanics. You also construct constellations to unlock the story of your past life. On top of that, as if to pop out and say 'BOO', there's a touch of the twin-stick shooter mixed in for good measure. This is definitely one spectre we don't want to banish, though these haunted pages can only house so many shadows – perhaps this one will be better situated taking up residence among your rafters.

Sea Of Thieves

Galleons of fun for all the family

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £39.99
ETA Out now
PUB Microsoft
DEV Rare
OFFLINE REVIEW N/A
PLAYERS 1-4 (crew), 2-24 (server)
CROSSPLAY PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series
CROSS-GEN N/A

Arrrrr you ready for the best pirate experience on PS5? Okay, that's not saying much, but a win's a win. You can sail a ship, follow maps to buried treasure, steal and sell loot, and get drunk on grog (not a good idea in battle); though you'll be fighting the systems almost as often as undead pirates and other players.

There's a *lot* to see and do in Sea Of Thieves, but – partly by design, mostly by accident – an awful lot of it is hidden. Hidden in menus, hidden via lack of tutorials, and, just sometimes, intentionally hidden by the devs as thrilling surprises for players to stumble upon. At least you can slowly uncover a lot of this by being matched with more experienced players.

> When you match with people interested in actually playing, it's an experience like no other.

Matchmaking, though, is the main issue to be overcome. There's no shortage of players, but with no matchmaking filters (for general exploration, treasure hunting, and so on), you can and often will be dropped into a crew consisting of different people with different goals. It's a stop-start experience, with far too many of our attempted sessions aborted when crewmates quickly quit for no apparent reason, or wander around aimlessly refusing to do, well… *anything*.

BOOTY CALL

But when you *do* match with people interested in actually

Downtime can often raise a smile as your crew shares a jolly tune.

playing at being pirates, it really is an experience like no other. Cheerily playing a shanty together while sailing to a destination; frantically scrambling to staff the cannons when a rival ship is sighted; working together to take down a malevolent skeleton captain and his cursed crew on an island; loading your ship with treasure, then sailing to an outpost to sell it so you can all share in the rewards. You can never be sure precisely what's going to happen.

Almost nobody uses voice chat, which means communication relies on a range of pre-written phrases and the ability to point. This can work quite well, though difficulties are caused by the fact that – despite the game being first released on Xbox and PC in 2018 – there is *still* no ability to place waypoints or mark items. This leads to us (and others) occasionally running into frustration when trying to communicate something that should have been very simple.

If you have to be a lone wolf, it *is* possible to sail alone, and even with no other players on the server (though an internet connection is still required). Sea Of Thieves is undoubtedly best when played with others, however, even though this means you run the risk of having your hard-earned treasure stolen. Mind you, that also means that *you* might be able to be the one doing the stealing, and what's more piratey than that? Dig through the dirt, and you'll soon strike that chest full of gold.

HOLY SHIP!

01

The problem with firing cannons at a rival ship is that they tend to fire cannons back. If they score a hit, they'll knock holes in your vessel's wooden hull, and you need to deal with those quickly.

02

Get below deck, grab some wood from the barrel, and find those holes! Fixing them is a simple matter of equipping the wood and holding R2, but be sure to keep somebody up top to defend while you do this.

03

The job isn't done! Equip your bucket, and throw the seawater overboard. Remember you can also fill your bucket from the water bucket to combat any fires started by firebombs (which you can use too!).

Matchmaking and communication could do with some work, but they're can't drag down what is undeniably a joyful experience... with the right people. Luke Kemp

7
PLAY

PS5 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE NEW GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

Baldur's Gate 3

Based on fifth edition Dungeons & Dragons, developer Larian has apparently bottled the essence of only our most electric tabletop sessions to serve up an incredible RPG return. Offering a wealth of options for crafting your own adventurer – and 'yes, and-ing' your choices all the way – the story of how you become the titular city's saviour (or tyrant) feels distinctly your own at every turn.

02

Resident Evil 4

Neither losing sight of its legacy or Leon S Kennedy's characteristic wit, this ground-up remake of one of the best survival horror shooters of all time boasts sharply honed combat, gloriously gory visuals, and even allows Ashley just a touch more independence.

03

Deathloop

Everything we love about Arkane's detailed, dense, and destructive gameplay in a game you'll keep coming back to. Unavoidably, as hero Colt's trapped in a time loop until he can pull off eight kills in a day, while being hunted by Julianna (who can be controlled by another player).

04

Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

A delightful return for the lombax/robot duo, using PS5's power to allow seamless portal hopping and stunning vistas and DualSense to give the comically large arsenal real oomph. A real showpiece that feels marvellous in the hands, and makes the case for PS5 exclusives.

05

God Of War Ragnarök

Mastercrafted to the point that would make Brok and Sindri blush, this apocalyptic father-son adventure pushes Kratos and Atreus to their limits. Building on the last game, everything from combat to level design is snappier, and it's a gorgeous end to the world.

06

Dragon's Dogma 2

Toss saurians over your shoulder to lob them off cliffs, clutch onto griffins for dear life as they soar away, or simply combo chimera into oblivion. From fights with big beasties to how you solve quests, this RPG epic bends to how you play while offering a challenge worth rising to.

07

Alan Wake 2

Remedy lets its freak flag fly in this twisting tale of two protagonists. As both FBI profiler Saga Anderson and author Alan you crisscross realities, blasting Taken and chasing pages. Layered, even a touch experimental, you've not heard one quite like this before.

08

Demon's Souls

Not many games allow you to feel the thrum of a gigantic heart in the controller. From sword slashes against nightmarish creatures to feeling magic fill your hands, this stunning recreation of the PS3 classic is a tour of just what makes PS5 so great.

09

Uncharted: Legacy Of Thieves Collection

The best got better. Presenting Nathan Drake's final outing alongside spin-off The Lost Legacy, this collection implements a range of PS5 features. Higher framerates smooth out the action, haptic feedback boosts gunfights, and 3D audio adds a new dimension to the banter.

10

Marvel's Spider-Man 2

Two heroes prove to be better than one with this smart sequel. The incredibly lush NYC is bigger, and slicker to web-swing and web-glide around, and missions have you brawling and sneaking through some superbly designed and unique areas. Spidey senses tingled.

11

Final Fantasy VII Rebirth

PS1 overworld traipsing is reimagined here with ridiculous depth, making for one massive globetrotting RPG epic. Combat levels up from the first game, mixing together real-time hack-and-slash with slower commands for high-octane strategising.

12

Control Ultimate Edition

Jesse Faden's mind-bending, environment-destroying, object-chucking, new weird adventure sings on PS5. A framerate of 60fps delights, and Remedy's use of ray tracing is among the best we've seen. The sole problem is you're able to pick only one of two visual options.

13

Dead Space

This remake is a reminder that the USG Ishimura is one of the best science-fiction haunted houses in the biz. Modernising touches not only give Isaac Clarke a voice but also keep long-time fans guessing by reinventing familiar necromorph encounters.

14

Hitman 3

On PS5, Agent 47's latest hit list looks beautiful – oh boy, those reflections! The good news is not only can you play the latest missions on PS5, you can replay all missions from Hitman and Hitman 2 inside IO's new PS5-developed engine. That's *a lot* of content.

15

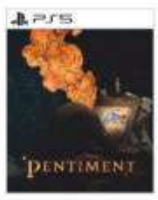
Tekken 8

Boasting a roster of returning favourites alongside new faces, and introducing mechanics that make every bout snappier, this fighter hits hard and fast. Looking better than ever only on current-gen hardware, busting out your Wind God Fist has never before felt so satisfying.

16

Humanity

Channelling the bizarre spirit of PS1 puzzlers, this surreal quest to guide a populace through blocky mazes leans on modern tech to deliver sheer scope and spectacle. It helps that you, as a little shiba inu, must lead the way, becoming humanity's saviour.

17 

Pentiment

Ever looked at a tapestry and thought: what if I could play that? And investigate a murder over the course of many years? Thankfully, there's no need to worry about being booted from the museum, as this excellent choice-driven narrative is playable at home.

18

Street Fighter 6

The streets come to PS5 in spectacular fashion. With a mix of fan-favourite fighters and excellent newcomers, the fighting is easier to get into than ever, yet just as deep. An in-depth story mode is more middleweight, but still vibrant and fun. An excellent round.

19

Helldivers 2

It's time to liberate the galaxy and spread democracy far and wide in the name of Super Earth. This tongue-in-cheek bug and 'bot shooter always brings you back for another round of co-op chaos. Just mind the friendly fire when you pepper the planet with orbital strikes.

20

Monster Hunter Rise

Though its maps may be smaller than those of Monster Hunter: World, everything else is souped-up, whether that's inventive new animal allies, your weapon combos, the vibrant feudal Japan styling, or the rampaging monster hordes. Go big... and save your home!

21

Gran Turismo 7

Like taking a bath in luxury motor oil while Yamauchi and the rest of Polyphony Digital relax you with cosy car history. The good vibes are matched by fantastic visual fidelity, and car handling enhanced by the DualSense controller for unparalleled driving feedback.

22

Solar Ash

Playing like a cross between Jet Set Radio and Sonic, gliding through the Ultravoid feels buttery-smooth. The subtle rumble of the DualSense offers an immersive layer to both movement and the action of pinning down an enemy. This is well worth losing yourself in.

23

Neon White

Fusing Doom-like blasting, speedy platforming, and card-based puzzling together in one heady, lightning-fast mix, Neon White is a jolt to the system like little else. Pure, electric gaming bliss that'll have you playing again and again to shave seconds off your best times.

24

Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown

In a hop, skip, and a time-warping jump, this once-beloved series has parkoured its way back into our hearts with a new protagonist, Sargon. Movement and combat both possess layers that are a joy to peel back throughout this metroidvania return-to-form.

25

EA Sports FC 24

FIFA's replacement represents a total overhaul. Men and women are mixed together in FUT to create limitless Three Lions/Lionesses combos. Individual PlayStyles transform gameplay, while presentation is as good as we've ever seen. Golazzo.

PLAY ON

Know what you like and looking for more? Here are alternatives to enjoy on your PS5

Tekken 8 has it all: a huge cast, generations of family drama, and bustups in unlikely spaces. While the story mode attempts to wrangle all that with mixed results, the action in each round is thrilling. It's a tough act to follow, but here are three more games hoping to be contenders.

PICK #1

JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: All Star Battle R

Do you underSTAND?

You knew this one was coming as soon as we mentioned family drama. It's based on the popular manga series about the strange trials and tribulations of the Joestar family, and boasts a massive roster. Many characters possess the power of a Stand, often described as a 'punch ghost' by fans. As fighters go, it's style over substance, with long animations disrupting the flow of combat more often than punctuating it. But if you're a JoJo stan, that's likely music to your ears.

PICK #2

Guilty Gear Strive

A bona fide banger

Uh, what was that about style *and* substance? Because this fighter has both by the truckload. We don't have the space to explain Strive's story mode about dramatic witches, presidential plots, and an ascent to godhood, but the vibes are immaculate throughout what is essentially a short season of anime. Thanks to killer 3D animation that could pass itself off as the bounciest, squashiest of 2D cel work, the action always packs a punch. Strive is a total knockout (and we haven't even started on its killer soundtrack).

PICK #3

Unicorn Overlord

Getting to the point

If you hunger for armies of characters duking it out but want something that'll tickle your noodle tactically, Vanillaware's latest, which combines real-time unit movement with strategic turn-based battles, is worth crossing swords with. You'll fight your way across lands buckling under the weight of the tyrannical Zenoirian Empire and recruit allies to your rebellion. Every character has a selection of specialised skills, from blades to buffs, and every bout is brought to life by gorgeous 2D art and deep unit customisation options.

The UI can get busy, but Vanillaware's art *always* hits the mark.

PS4 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE LAST GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

Red Dead Redemption 2

You won't find another open world quite like this, the streets of Los Santos paling in comparison to this gorgeous, realistic western sprawl. Arthur Morgan's wild west adventure is epic, emotional, and has enough teasing mysteries on every horizon for no two cowboys' journeys to feel the same. With train robberies, tootin' headshots, and racists to kill, there's never a dull moment in Rockstar's greatest.

02

Grand Theft Auto V

Laughing in the face of other cross-gen ports, GTA V on PS4 is more than a mere HD remaster. Upped to a glorious 1080p, it weaves together everything that made the PS3 original great, with new music, more dynamic weather, and a game-changing FPS mode.

03

God Of War

A departure in some ways but a resounding return in others, Kratos is back with a son *and* a ruddy big axe. Taking the legend from Greek to Norse mythology, this entry brings a lot to the table while improving on what was core to the earlier series' identity.

04

The Last Of Us Part II

Arguably the original is holistically better but there are few games that push PS4 to its limits as this sequel does. With near-photoreal visuals, emotional twists that land, and enough new ideas to ensure you're always thinking, this is a slick followup.

05

Dreams

This is a feature-laden platform of artistic tools that enables you to create everything from characters, elements, and scenes to entire games, and resets any ideas about what a console 'game' should be and do. Dreams should be installed on every PS4.

06

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Game Of The Year Edition

The White Wolf's epic journey is an RPG experience like no other on PS4. It's been made even more spectacular with this gigantic pack stuffed with DLC, making it a must-have part of any gaming library.

07

Assassin's Creed Odyssey

A beautiful open world where every Greek island tells a unique story, AC Odyssey is a epic in the truest sense, with lively writing, mythical beasts to battle, and a poignant Assassin's Creed story that lays the table for all the delicious lore to come. A brilliant spectacle.

08

Horizon Zero Dawn

A staggeringly large world that condenses cracking combat, accessible systems, and uncut eye candy into an action RPG that will please anyone. In Aloy, PlayStation might just have a new icon. Come for the robo-fights, stay for the exquisitely dense mythology.

09

Marvel's Spider-Man

Borrowing heavily from Rocksteady's acclaimed Batman series, this delivers the heart and soul of Marvel's superhero. It ticks every box you could ask for: perfect web-swinging, a powerful story, a roster of classic villains, and all of New York City to defend.

10

Persona 5 Royal

The most stylish JRPG ever made finds its definitive form in expanded release Royal. It combines dark and moving teen angst with unforgettable friendships that power you up in the heart-invading dungeons, and sets the gold standard for the genre.

11

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

FromSoftware's latest adventure repackages its unflinchingly difficult combat into a fantastical take on feudal Japan. More accessible than Bloodborne but layered with equally clever and subtle ideas, this is director Hidetaka Miyazaki's best yet.

12

Bloodborne

With the finest third-person melee combat in gaming, droolworthy art design, and the most twisted monsters imaginable, this is a gorgeously gothic must-have. The Old Hunters expansion adds enough nightmare fuel to make a return to Yharnam essential.

13

Monster Hunter: World

Presenting a vibrant open world, light on story but heavy on monster-mashing action, this is the most accessible entry in the series yet. Perfecting the feel-good grind through its complex systems and pitch-perfect multiplayer, it's a PS4 must-play.

14

Resident Evil 2

Powered by the RE Engine, this remake is more than a classic game with a facelift. The new Tyrant and improved zombie AI add tension, and fresh areas not seen in the PS1 classic update the core gameplay making this Resi 2 a celebration of PS1 *and* PS4.

15

Yakuza 0

Set in Japan in the '80s, this is the perfect entry point to the long-running series. Bouncing between two heroes, you take part in a crime thriller by bashing enemies into dropping piles of cash, and undertake side-quests that include stealthily buying pornography.

16

Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

Solving your own murder seems hard enough, but you quickly find it's a single domino in a whole conspiracy run. Fortunately, as a ghost, that's where you shine, controlling objects poltergeist-style to untangle puzzle-box murders moments before others cop it.

17

Psychonauts 2

Level design and narrative mesh together in this long-awaited sequel. Bounce around vibrant, ever-creative platform worlds inside other peoples' minds as you help them conquer trauma – and save the world. Ever-warm, the script is one of the funniest around.

18

Nier: Automata

Few games require immediate replaying, but this *demands* it. The twisty-turny story reveals more just when you think you're done, and the android combat as you explore is top-notch thanks to PlatinumGames' expertise in creating character action titles.

19

Mass Effect Legendary Edition

A space opera in game form. Explore the galaxy as you try to stop a universe-wide threat, building a team of the best as you go. The adventures are better than ever in this smoothed-over version. A fan of science-fiction sagas? You owe it to yourself to have one of your own.

20

Days Gone

On the surface this seems to be a step backwards: a testosterone-fuelled Freaker-killing adventure, one man and his bike versus the apocalypse. Slowly you realise Bend Studio's playing with you, and everything's flipped on its head – while the action's excellent throughout.

21

Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age

JRPGs don't get more classic-feeling than this, but DQ embraces its traditional qualities, giving its turn-based fights and Toriyama-designed visuals a modern overhaul. This is an adventure that'll stick with you.

22

Dishonored 2

The followup to a PS3 great, mixing a creative skillset with impressive level design to create a Kaldwin-ning immersive sim. From the shifting rooms of The Clockwork Mansion to learning to link your powers, there's so much scope for experimenting.

23

Alien: Isolation

Explore Ridley Scott's original vision of a horrifying future in startling fidelity, as this game recreates the tension with an attention to detail that borders on the obsessive. It's time to remember what made the xenomorph so scary... and then get killed by it.

24

Shadow Of The Colossus

Bluepoint completely overhauls the visuals of Team Ico's masterpiece but still manages to match the original step-for-step in its remake. New controls and a beautiful photo mode add to the package. Wander's tragic quest has never looked or played better.

25

New Star GP

This lo-fi racer is the best of both worlds, finding pole position as it pursues a dedication to career mode with arcadey joy. Its lack of licensing just makes it more lightweight, able to have fun with evolving racing rivalries and destruction that'd make famous marques cringe.

TAYLOR MADE DEALS

Watching the pennies? We'll help you play more without breaking the bank

UNDER £20

Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales

£19.85 approx (PS5, hit.co.uk)

Finally in our web

We love all three Spider-Man adventures from Insomniac. While PS5 launch game Miles Morales might be the slightest, that also means it's the most focussed. Avoiding open world bloat, this is a fast-paced adventure that's akin to a superhero movie, never losing sight of the personal stakes for Miles as he holds down the Spidey fort while Peter Parker's away – and of course, things spiral out of control. It's all going down at Christmas; New York City looks dazzling in the snow and the festivities bring a real sense of community to Harlem, where Miles lives.

UNDER £15

Persona 5 Tactica

£14.99 approx (PS5, amazon.co.uk)

A strategic deal

Move over, sprawling dungeons. The characters from the 100-plus-hour RPG epic swing into action for something altogether more bite-size. The Phantom Thieves are once again sucked into a mind palace, but here become caught up in a revolution of sorts. Battles are XCOM-like skirmishes that force you to make use of cover and locations' verticality, as opposed to P5's more static fights. Demon-like persona still to hand, you're able to combo your way through enemies, ping-ponging them out of cover to mop them all up, each mission taking only a short time to complete.

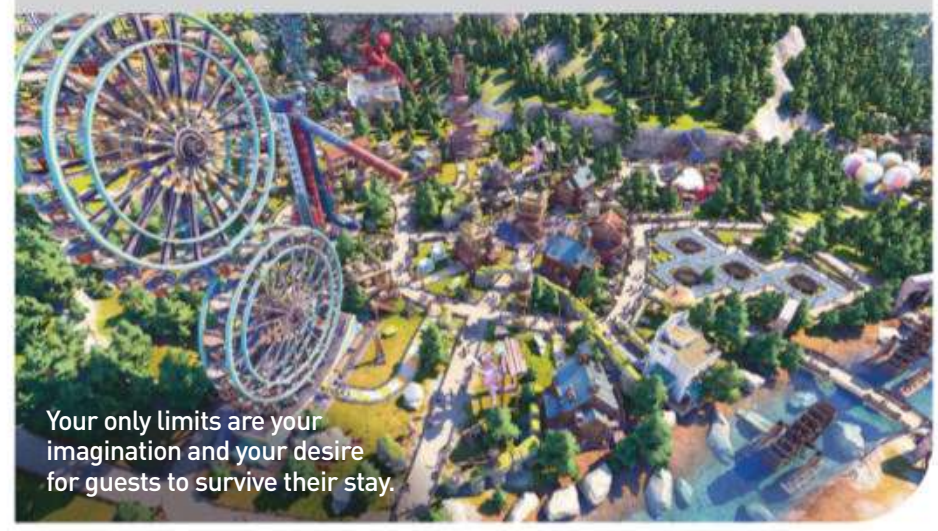
UNDER £10

Park Beyond

£8.97 approx (PS5, amazon.co.uk)

Wallet below

Building the theme park of your dreams has never been so cost-effective. The downside is that the park isn't in real life. The upside, though, is that Park Beyond allows you to customise just about everything imaginable, including designing rides that teeter on the edge of impossible (or at least on the edge of health and safety). As ever with this kind of game, this is just your ticket to get you through the door – plenty of DLC is available. But even this core package is full of fun features like coaster building and (our favourite) customer engagement heat maps.



Your only limits are your imagination and your desire for guests to survive their stay.

PSVR2 Hall of fame

THE VIRTUAL REALITY HITS YOU HAVE TO PLAY

01

NEW

Umurangi Generation VR

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Well, this modern classic sees that aphorism and raises it with righteous, rebellious rage. Ostensibly an immersive photography game, you have a range of lenses, camera settings, and filters to play with but there's a far bigger picture to be seen. Not only a master class in environmental storytelling, this is also testament to art as a powerful act of resistance.

02

Synapse

This roguelite shooter offers satisfying, stylish action in a monochrome world punctuated by colourful violence. It puts power in the palm of your hand – and your eyes. Going one step beyond point and shoot, PSVR2's eye-tracking tech allows you to glance and grab.

03

Horizon: Call Of The Mountain

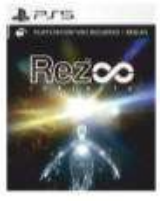
Manages to make level after level of climbing compelling with different environments to pull yourself up through, the Sense controllers allowing for neat player expression. Just make sure you take a break, or all that spider monkeying will make your arms throb.

04

Star Wars: Tales From The Galaxy's Edge

Who shot first? *You*. Tactile controls make being a droid techie-turned-scoundrel a blast(er), from pulling gear off your body to using tools to meddle with machines. A bonus mode allows for lightsaber waggling too.

05



Rez Infinite

When you thought Testuya Mizuguchi's synaesthesia shooter was done, it moves to a new beat. Laden with sharp particle effects, twitchy controls make this unmissable, with eye-tracking aiming a revelation for this experiential shoot-'em-up.

06

Tetris Effect: Connected

While also on PS5, Mizuguchi's trippy, transcendent take on the block-based puzzler is nothing short of a masterpiece in PSVR2, placing you within a world of tumbling tiles like never before, enhanced from the base version with more collaborative elements.

07

No Man's Sky

The frontier is far from final, this free refresh for the latest headset propelling you to the stars. All the prior updates are here, and you've an unmatched level of fidelity to reach out and touch the bizarre randomly rolled planets you uncover (and to fiddle with your ship).

08

Moss: Book II

Both rodent puzzle platformers benefit from PSVR2 enhancements, but the star performer of the pair is this sequel that's every bit the mouse's whiskers. As charming as ever, expanded combat options mean you feel even more connected to your li'l hero, Quill.

09

Gran Turismo 7

Ever driven a car? Then you'll know what to expect. GT7's already incredible simulation races gain a new level of immersion simply from checking your GPS and mirrors and seeing the courses whizz by. It's only a new view mode, yet it's enough to be a must-try.

10

Before Your Eyes

Blink and you will indeed miss it. Put down the Sense controllers, as here you interact using eye tracking, piecing together your life scene by scene, progressing whenever your peepers close (generously, the mechanic can be turned off if you want to see everything).

11

Little Cities: Bigger!

Waving your hands like a conductor, you paint with land and accent with buildings. This is a town-builder toybox, with management mechanics sanded down to an accessible degree, and lots of delightful details like your city's denizens looking up to wave at you.

12

Stilt

This one's at its best when you throw your arms wide and embrace the silliness. Straightforward platforming is reinvented in VR, and allows the simple joy of hurling yourself around to shine – to say nothing of the fact that upgrades enable you to strap cannons to your feet.

13

Song In The Smoke Rekindled

The devs have taken great pains to ensure this stripped-back survival game remains immersive at all times, placing much of what you need to do, from skinning pelts to pinging arrows, directly in your hands. Be careful to keep the dark at bay at night, too.

14

The Last Clockwinder

This spatial puzzler is all about putting things in the right place, whether that's flinging objects around or putting yourself to work. Thanks to the ability to summon clones, you're quite the helping hand (now if only we could do that at PLAY Towers).

15

The Last Worker

Work hard, revolt harder. As a token final human working alongside machines in a send-up of big online retailers, you need to balance the oddly compelling mundanity of sorting and organising packages with sneaking around vents to bring down big business.

PSVR Hall of fame

GREAT EXPERIENCES TO THIS DAY

01

Astro Bot Rescue Mission

This pint-sized adventure packs charm in spades even if it isn't exactly chock-full of challenge. Bringing the classic puzzle platformer formula bang up to date in PSVR, it won't take many levels before you're calling out, "Beam me up, Botty!" Also, the nippers will love it.

02

The Persistence

This first-person horror roguelike offers perfectly sized chunks of survival bursts. It's everything you'd expect from a full PS4 release, but in PSVR it's filled with clever ideas, unique weapons, genuine jump scares, and fab looks – plus great couchplay as well.

03

Star Wars: Squadrons

A fan's dream come true: experience epic Star Wars space battles from the cockpits of the films' most famous starfighters. Whether you're flying a TIE fighter or X-wing there's absolutely no thrill like skimming the surface of a Star Destroyer in PS VR.

04

Resident Evil VII: Biohazard

Can you can go eye-to-eye with the Bakers? Playing in VR raises the tension to almost unbearable levels and has gameplay benefits such as face-aiming, which makes shooting a lot easier. A brilliant example of how VR can improve already great games.

05

Blood & Truth

The truth? You can't handle the truth. But if you can, then you'll discover one of PSVR's best shooters, tied to the kind of slick cinematic narrative we're used to from Sony's non-VR releases. Blood & Truth is one of the most complete games for PSVR.

06

Beat Saber

With your PSVR headset firmly on and PS Move controllers in hand, Beat Saber feels like the game both pieces of hardware were made for. In it you have to master songs and challenges by swiping your neon swords through the air and dodging with your head.

07

Iron Man VR

With a finely-crafted control setup that enables flight within small sandbox maps, and gives you the option to inhabit the designer shoes of the billionaire playboy too, Iron Man VR is an almost-perfect interpretation of the famous Avenger. It's a PSVR must-play.

08

Hitman 3

Every mission in the World Of Assassination trilogy can be played in PSVR via the latest entry in the series. That's a *lot* of murderous action. It all plays brilliantly too, with the act of puzzling through hits as Agent 47 perfectly suited to virtual reality. One of PSVR's best.

09

To The Top

This creative platform-puzzler enables you to scamper, jump, and skate across its 35 sandbox worlds with the aid of your PS Move controllers. It's as physically demanding to play as it is perplexing, and all the better for it. To The Top is a PSVR one-off.

10

I Expect You To Die 2: The Spy and The Liar

A spy comedy offering a front-row seated experience. Known as The Phoenix to your foes, you thwart villains across six missions delightfully steeped in genre tropes. Short, silly, and slick – like only the best agents.

WHAT'S NEW PLUS-SY CAT?

Digging into the random acts of gaming a lengthy PS Plus subscription offers

June's PS Plus offerings all contained larger-than-life personalities and over-the-top action. Available on both PS5 and PS4 were colourful cartoon platformer **SpongeBob SquarePants: The Cosmic Shake** and pro-wrestle-'em-up **AEW Fight Forever**.

For this column we'll be focussing on the final offering, which was only on PS4, **Streets Of Rage 4**. The 2020 return of the much-loved arcade beat-'em-up, this brawler gives us eight main fighters lovingly rendered in a fresh art style, plus 13 retro heroes sporting a classic pixel art look.

This legacy sequel is set a decade after the original trilogy and sees new and familiar faces staring down the Y crime syndicate, led by the terrible twins Mr and Ms Y. Pounding these streets (and the syndicate's many disposable goons) once again are the dream team of Axel Stone, Blaze Fielding, and Adam Hunter.

And I choose to play as none of them. Don't get me wrong, Blaze is still my girl, but for this go-around I'm ready to rock as newcomer Cherry Hunter. Fighting with her fists, feet, and a ludicrously sturdy electric guitar, I have a whale of a time hurling myself at enemies and strumming out a dirge for the soon-to-be defeated.

Collectible stars also allow you to bring the noise with flashy, character-specific star moves too – for example, Cherry knee-slides through the villainous lineup. Blitz Moves, which traditionally see you dishing out heavy damage at the cost of some health, are back too, though now they offer the opportunity to recover your spent health by following up with an unbroken combo. That's one way to say 'Be aggressive' – and the new weapon catch mechanic is another.

Streets Of Rage 4 isn't reinventing the wheel, but it doesn't need to. Make no mistake, this is another beat-'em-up banger.

Moving faster than most, Cherry Hunter lobs herself at the opposition and hits a power chord with her inventive moveset.

DIGITAL OFFER

FOR PRINT SUBSCRIPTION DEALS, TURN TO PAGE 66

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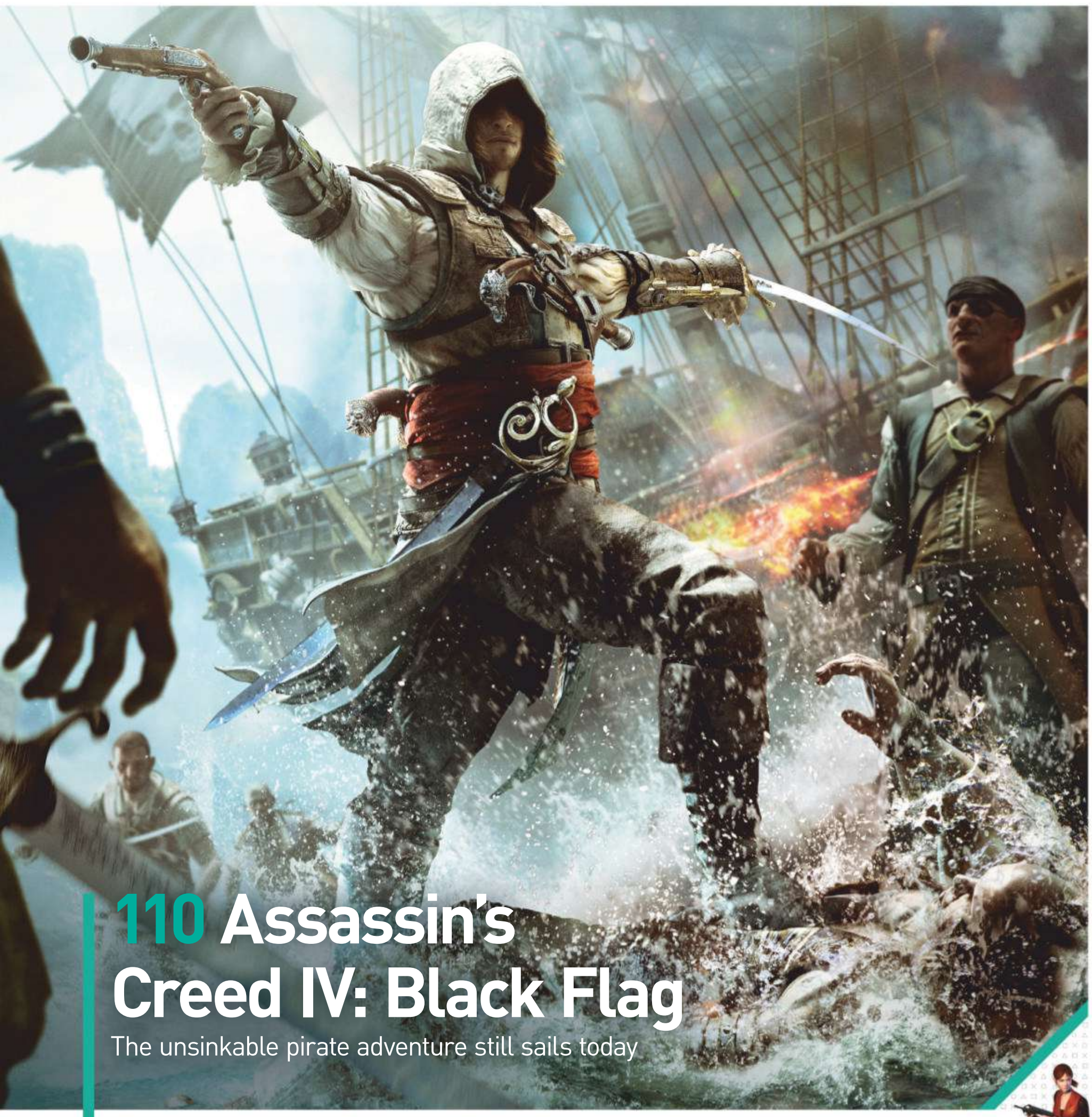
RetroStation



110 Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag

The unsinkable pirate adventure still sails today

HIGHLIGHTS

MEMORY CARD: SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: DIGITAL DEVIL SAGA 108 | DEFENDING: RAMON SALAZAR 109
PLUS POINTS: G-POLICE 112 | A BRIEF HISTORY OF... MOVIE STARS IN GAMES 113
PARTING SHOT: RESIDENT EVIL – CODE: VERONICA X 114

DON'T DELETE

Save icons for these historical July moments spin in the PLAY hive mind. Do you remember this?

5 YEARS

That's right, 2019 was *five years ago*. Two-player FPS Wolfenstein: Youngblood sees twins Jessie and Zofia carry on the Nazi-slaying activities of their dear old dad, Wolfenstein legend BJ Blazkowicz, when he disappears.

10 YEARS

Oddworld: New 'N' Tasty! set a high bar for remakes. Dev Just Add Water rebuilt Oddworld Inhabitants' cinematic platformer from the ground up, scattering three times as many Mudokons to find along the way. That said, you don't need to save all 299 for the good ending...

15 YEARS

Battlefield 1943 is notable chiefly because you can't play it any more. A digital-only release, this multiplayer shooter was delisted in 2023. Online servers were shut down that same year. A cautionary tale about videogame preservation.

MEMORY CARD

Shin Megami Tensei: Digital Devil Saga

Chowing down in celebration of this duology's 20th birthday

The duology streamlines SMT's combat, while introducing the twist of a party that turn *into* demons.

Six tribes vie for control of the Junkyard, an apparently post-apocalyptic place where the rain never stops. (No, it's not the UK; there are no red postboxes.) In the middle of a firefight between the Vanguards and your own party, drawn from the Embryon tribe, a mysterious bulb blooms, infecting everyone with the overwhelming urge to 'eat them all.'

While this turn-based RPG deploys familiar SMT trademarks like the Press Turn system, there are no Wild Cards here. Instead everyone, including silent protagonist Serph, can transform into hungry demons. Devouring defeated demons you grants 'Atma', which you can use to customise your party's individual capabilities – though overindulging will give you one heck of a tummy ache. Ambushes can throw a spanner in the works too, catching you out with no time to transform. These encounters force you to choose between wasting a round to throw up the horns for each party member, or spending turns on team-up attacks that combine human-form firepower and an elemental edge.

Compelling combat combined with an RPG story in a distinctly mythic mode, so it's no wonder this got its hooks into so many.

Reader **Lowell Orlando Richmond** shares it's an RPG that really left its mark on him, saying, "Favourite SMT game no doubt. I'm planning on getting all the Atma stamps."

INFO

PUB Ghostlight
DEV Atlus
RELEASED ON PS2
RELEASE 2004
IF YOU LIKE THAT, TRY THIS...
Need your fusion fix? PS2 RPG Shadow Hearts can satiate you, and Tales Of Berseria on PS4 even boasts a feisty therian protagonist.

▷ Join in the conversation as we celebrate PlayStation's past, present, and future with our community: you can email us at play@futurenet.com.

Kaine Williams says it "needs a remaster with both games."

While there was a digital rerelease for PS3, this isn't an easy one to play today. **Jamie Hammond** bemoans this: "Wish this was on the store. Lost my [PS2] disc somehow years ago." Well, there's nothing for it – arrange the remaster summoning circle!

BYTE-SIZE BITS

Essential numbers that add together to tell you everything you need to know about the game.

153,421

Units of the first game had been sold in Japan by the end of 2004. The sequel sold 90,812 by the end of 2005.

2000

The year when Atlus first contacted Japanese novelist Yu Godai about collaborating on the duology's story.

34

Out of 40 – the score Japanese gaming mag Famitsu gave both games.

DEFENDING

Ramon Salazar

As silly as he is sinister, Salazar's the perfect villain for Resident Evil 4, argues Abbie Stone

He's a ponytailed, pint-sized, preposterous little twerp, and for many Ramon Salazar is justification personified for why Resident Evil 4 needed a more serious remake last year. For me personally, everything camp, fun, and charmingly ridiculous about OG Resident Evil 4 can be found running through the plagas-filled veins of this outstanding git.

He's 20 years old, but somehow looks about five and 80 at the same time. He's a smug, monologuing Bond villain one moment, and a petulant, tantrum-throwing child the next. Resident Evil 4's castle is a game design masterpiece and Salazar is the perfect tour guide. He breaks into your communications and constantly rings Leon for a little chat. "I've sent my right hand to deal with you," he brags at one point. "Your right hand comes off?" says Leon, birthing approximately four million memes.

At first Salazar seems genuinely delighted by your presence, declaring "What a pleasant surprise!" His sadistic, infectious glee is Resident Evil 4 in a nutshell. This is the horror of an Evil Dead movie, the sense that a malevolent force isn't merely trying to destroy you, but actively enjoying playing with its food. Salazar has even commissioned the building of a giant clockwork statue of himself that chases you. This makes him the only millionaire in history who used his money the *right* way.

Salazar eventually pulls the classic Resident Evil villain move of transforming himself into a giant monster. We're always curious as to what would happen if it *did* beat us – would Salazar have to live as that monster forever, trapped in the room where we fought him, regretting his life choices? Anyway, how can you possibly hate a character who reacts to being shot with "Ha ha ha... that tickles"? Rest in peace, you utter monster.

> I THINK IT'S TIME I PAID MY DUE RESPECTS TO YOUR IMPRESSIVE AND STUBBORN WILL. MR KENNEDY... WELCOME."

Salazar's final monologue, before feeding himself to some tentacled Lovecraftian nightmare. We'd have gone with 'Oh no!' personally.

INFO

MAIN GAMES
Resident Evil 4 (2005), Resident Evil 4 (2023)

STATS
Roman Salazar is the eighth Count Of Valdelobos. We're gonna assume Counts one to seven were significantly better hangs.

According to a butler's memo, Salazar was manipulated into releasing the plagas parasites that are infecting everyone. Awww, he's the *real* victim!

Saying that, you can find another memo from the man himself where he brags about willingly releasing the plagas. Boo!

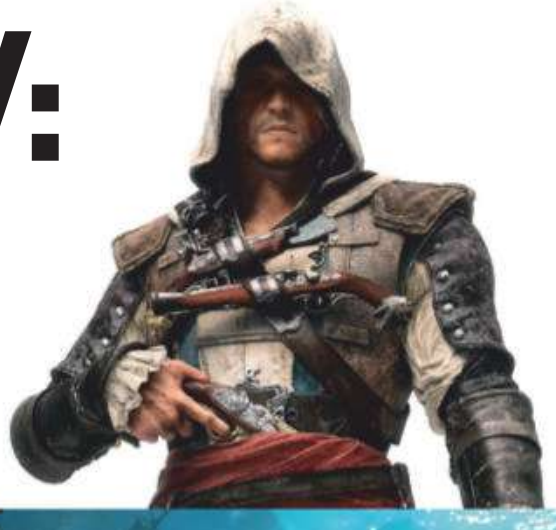
SPIN-OFFS
N/A

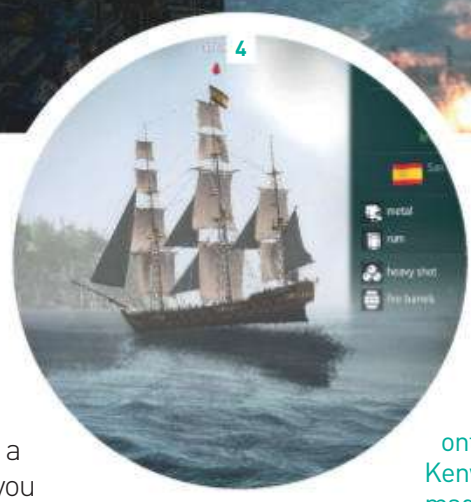
HOW TO PLAY?
Resident Evil 4 (2023), PS Store, £34.99; Resident Evil 4 (2004), PS Store, £15.99

CLASSIC GAME

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag

The peak of videogame piracy?





1 Stalking ships through the ocean is even more fun when you hum the Jaws theme. 2 Pirate hunters seek you out when your wanted level gets too high. 3 Allegedly, you can swing onto rival ships. Good luck getting Kenway to pull *that* off. 4 Use your magic telescope to see if a ship has cargo worth plundering. 5 Sword combat gets messy on deck.

BOOM! Cannonballs soar over the ocean waves and slam into the opposing ship. Your crew members cheer upon impact, reloading so you can line up another shot. You could blast a few extra rounds into the enemy ship's weak points to add insult to injury. Or you could fire a chain shot to slow it down. Or perhaps you'd prefer to change course and give it a good ramming?

Wait a tick... Captain! They're trying to ram *us*! Quickly now, spin the wheel, lower the sails, and get our lumbering vessel out of the way, ideally while elegantly curving to the side so we can line up our cannons and punish the other side's frankly *rude* attempt at retaliation. Yes, these stormy seas are also trying to capsize us, and several pirate hunters are also closing in because we've been terrorising the ocean for hours, but never mind that now – ATTACK!

The opposing ship is rocked by explosions. She's ready to board, captain! On your order, your crew start firing grappling hooks into the hull and you hop aboard, draw your swords, and start slashing. It's an Arkham-Asylum-style brawl, heavily reliant on counter attacks and quick reflexes. It's admittedly a lot rougher than Batman's bustups, but then you're not a billionaire in a chiroptera costume, you're a swashbuckling menace, so of course you're going to be less sophisticated in a scrap. Eventually the remaining crew will wisely surrender. Their ship is now yours!

Black Flag is the greatest pirate simulator ever. The sea is full of ships carrying sugar, rum, and other, more boring, inedible loot, just waiting for a greedy pirate to grab. This is fun on calm seas, but it's next-level brilliant in hostile waters, with storms ravaging your ship, lightning striking the water, and typhoons whirling towards you to get in on the fun. It's as cinematic and exhilarating a high-seas swashbuckling fantasy as you could hope for, complete with legally-distinct-from-Pirates-Of-The-Caribbean music roaring in the background.

You'll need wood, metal, and cloth to upgrade your ship, as well as a lot of cold, hard cash. This makes Ubisoft's most collectable-obsessed series a lot more bearable – at least every chest you find is getting you closer to that cannon upgrade you've been underlining on your Christmas list. True, anyone willing to collect all *200* Animus fragments is a lot more committed than us, but collecting five Templar keys for some terrific armour is a more reasonable ask, and leads to some of the game's best quests.

LANDLUBBER

Templars? Oh, yeah! It's an Assassin's Creed game! That means tailing missions, picking off guards, and hiding in haystacks too. However, Edward Kenway is a terrific pirate, but like many a sailor before him he's a lot more wobbly on land. Kenway has two speeds: too fast or snail-rivallingly slow. He's horribly stiff to move, gets caught on scenery, and loves climbing stuff that you were just trying to run past. If you forced Kenway to walk the plank the jelly-legged dope would probably end up doing the splits halfway up the masthead (which, in fairness, would save his life, so maybe he *is* a legendary pirate after all).

This lack of land legs is a major issue given Kenway is meant to be a stealthy assassin. A chase where you pursue a medicine-hoarding toff through a thunderstorm should be exhilarating. Instead, it's a tired parent simulator, as you spend repeated attempts yelling at Kenway to get down from that rooftop and chase your target properly. Stealth in the actual ship is a lot better, albeit incredibly silly. Why do enemy ships, crewed by sailors capable of looking in all sorts of directions, have such tiny cones of vision? Because there'd then be no game, so it's best you just roll with it, along with your crew's habit of singing sea shanties when you're *trying to be stealthy*. Imagine if Solid Snake had been taken out in Shadow Moses because he couldn't stop bellowing 'Drunken Sailor'. Ah, but who can blame them? Because if you abandon dry land for the superb sailing and ship-shooting, you'll find a game so good it's hard to stop singing its praises. No wonder our previous incarnation gave it 8/10 and its sales number in the tens of millions. Back on the ship, me hearties! ■

> **"It's about as cinematic and exhilarating a high-seas swashbuckling fantasy as you could hope for."**

INFO

PUB Ubisoft Montreal

DEV Ubisoft

RELEASED 2013

GET IT NOW £15.99, PS Store/ free with PS Plus Game Catalogue

NEED TO KNOW

1 Edward became Welsh after the developers heard voice actor Matt Ryan's native accent. Tidy!

2 References to the (then upcoming) Assassin's Creed Unity and Watch Dogs can be found.

3 The game also calls Assassin's Creed: Liberation a 'classic'. Was it the exact moment this series gave up on historical accuracy?

PLUS POINTS

G-Police

A game that really hits that elusive spot

1 Chasing bad guys through the air is fun, despite the clumsiness. 2 There are alternate camera views, but they're rarely useful. This one is good for bombing, though. 3 Gotta have gigantic adverts in your dystopian cyberpunk future!

The original PlayStation enabled and encouraged developers to create fully 3D experiences, but a lot of them have aged like a fine milk. So it should come as no surprise that this one is... great actually? Huh. Proof that great game design is timeless, and shooting stuff from a helicopter is awesome.

It must have been tempting to tell players to simply get to da chopper and blow up everything in sight, but G-Police is more nuanced than that. A surprisingly lengthy and well-produced intro (supported by cutscenes at various stages throughout the game) sets up a future when corporations have taken control,[1] and police of the G persuasion are trying to keep order.

Regular chatter during missions maintains the atmosphere and provides context for what you're doing. Sure, you *will* blow a lot of stuff up, but you'll also escort friendlies, scan targets to determine whether they're hostile or not, and often hold your fire until it's justified. (Where did that idea go?)

A FAIR COP

The age of the game means there's no dual-stick control (which would be a significant improvement), but what's in place works surprisingly well. The left stick is frustratingly twitchy, making precise aiming harder than it should be, but the simple addition of an airbrake goes a surprisingly long way towards making flight manageable. The awkwardness of your helicopter actually adds to the satisfaction of successfully piloting it.

We can't help but fantasise about a modern remake or sequel, with smooth controls[2] and a draw distance that doesn't make you think the pilot forgot to wear his glasses. That seems rather unlikely though (27 years and counting, no sign yet), and so the original will do us just fine. Now if you'll excuse us, we have to go and avenge our wingman who died in suspicious circumstances.

INFO

PUB Psygnosis
DEV Psygnosis
RELEASED 1997

FOOTNOTES 1 Not a novel idea, but slightly less commonplace back then. **2** Yes the awkwardness has a positive side, but we're open to a version without it.

HAVE YOUR SAY

Readers tell us what they think of our choice

"BRILLIANT GAME. STILL HAVE MY COPY. TIME FOR A NEW G-POLICE GAME I THINK"
David Masser

"IN MY TOP TEN OF PS1 GAMES."
Jason Rez

"I NEVER FINISHED THIS BUT THE GAME WAS SICK"
Karan Singh

▷ PS2 returns! **Sly Cooper** sneaks onto PS Plus

A BRIEF HISTORY OF

Movie stars in games

It's time to go stargazing, videogame style

Kristen Bell plays ex-assassin and Abstergo employee Lucy Stillman in Assassin's Creed I, II, and Brotherhood.

2021's Far Cry 6 stars Giancarlo Esposito (Danny Trejo was added in free DLC but later removed due to the licence expiring).

Wheelman (2009, PS3) features Vin Diesel as the player character. He was also to lead a movie that fell through.

The cast of Kingdom Hearts II (2005) included Christopher Lee. Patrick Stewart plays the Emperor in The Elder Scrolls IV (2006). **John Goodman can be found in 2011's Rage (Dan Hagar).** Gary Oldman has acted in Spyro and Call Of Duty.

BRUCIE BONUS

Armageddon outta here

Confusingly, singer-songwriter Poe not only contributed to Apocalypse's soundtrack, she also acted in it. Apocalypse didn't set the world on fire – shame; it would've been appropriate – but it was one of the first examples of an established actor appearing in a game. It did, however, use a new game engine that was reused for Tony Hawk's Pro Skater and Spider-Man.

APOCALYPSE (1998, PS1) ALLOWED PLAYERS TO STEP INTO POLYGONAL BRUCE WILLIS'S SHOES. IT WAS RELEASED THE SAME YEAR AS ARMAGEDDON.

Action movie star Chow Yun-fat leads in the 2007 PS3 shooter Stranglehold.

Splinter Cell's Sam Fisher was originally played by Michael Ironside.

Mark Hamill is behind the unforgettable Joker of Arkhams Asylum, City, and Knight. He's also played Joker in various animations.

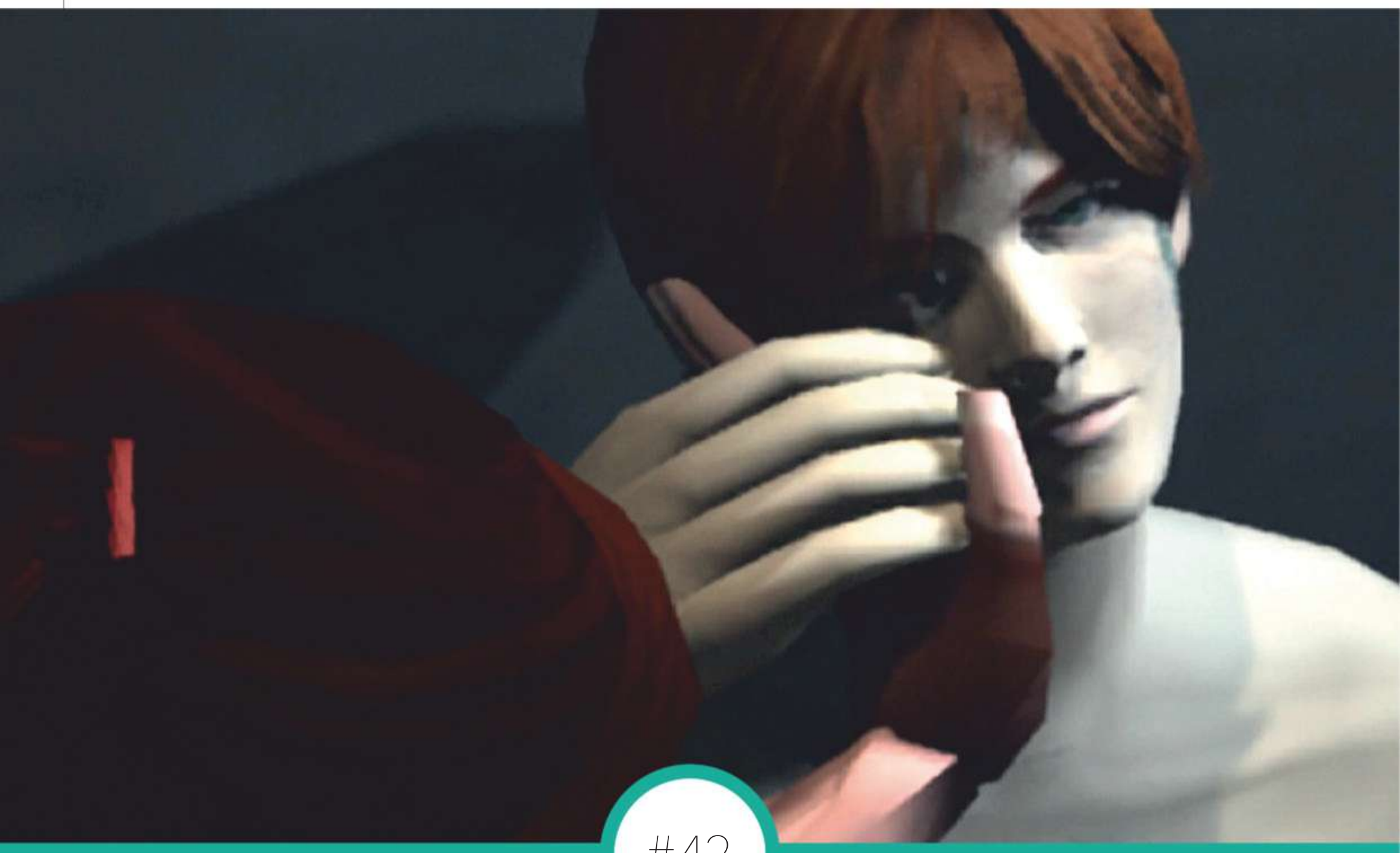
Grand Theft Auto: Vice City (2002, PS2) includes Danny Dyer, Burt Reynolds, and, of course, Ray Liotta as player character Tommy Vercetti.

AL TOGETHER NOW

Scarface that I wish you saw

Scarface: The World Is Yours was a 2006 PS2 sort-of sequel to the movie. Al Pacino lent his likeness to the character, but the voice was provided by voice actor André Sogliuzzo. However, other stars of the film, including Robert Loggia and Steven Bauer, did return. David McKenna (American History X) contributed to the script.

▷ Next issue: raising the flag for PlayStation's **pirates**!



#42

Burning out

Steve Burnside sadly isn't the Player Two you're looking for as the axe falls in **Resident Evil – Code: Veronica X**

FORMAT PS3, PS2 / **PUB** CAPCOM / **DEV** CAPCOM / **RELEASED** 2001

Claire Redfield's assault on an Umbrella base goes pear-shaped when she's captured and shipped off to a prison island, and then (of course) it's overrun by a zombie-creating virus. The only thing offering hope is Steve Burnside, one of the few survivors.

While you're unsure at first if you can trust Steve, he and Claire begin to help one another as their separate stories interweave.

Given previous Resident Evils, and the fact you're given a brief chance to go sub-machine-gun happy as you play as him, you could be forgiven for thinking he'll be the B-side to Claire's A-side story. Sadly, that's not Steve's fate (her brother, Chris, fills that gap). Steve might save Claire from a Bandersnatch, and help her escape the island and land in Antarctica, but she's unable to return the favour. After he's captured by Alexia Ashford, Claire can release his chains but she can't reverse the effects of the T-Veronica virus.

As he mutates into a monster, Claire has no choice but to run, the hulking Steve taking no damage from attacks. The hallway is littered with traps, while Steve swings a giant axe (making this one of several annoying sections in which taking damage is essentially unavoidable).

Instead, Steve has to save Claire one final time. With her in his grasp, he's able to fight the infection and turn his axe upon himself, fighting against T-Veronica to revert to his normal form in his dying moments and confess his feelings for Claire. It's a tragic end for him. He's a hero we'd like to see one more time.

TIME TO PLAY? You'll see this sad moment close to the end of the game. After control shifts to Chris for quite some time, you get the chance to play as Claire again just before Chris faces Alexia. It's a short but dangerous sequence, so make sure you pack some green herbs.

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PLAY

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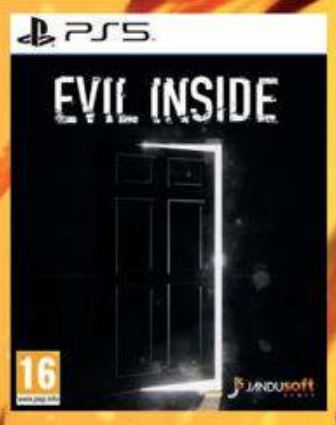

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